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THE MARTYR OF LOVE

THE LIFE OF LOUISE DE LA VALLIÈRE

BY CLAUDE FERVAL pseud
Marguerite Thomas-Balline baronne
Aimery de Pierrebourg

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
JEAN RICHEPIN

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY
SIDNEY DARK

WITH A PHOTOGRAVURE FRONTISPIECE
AND 16 ILLUSTRATIONS IN HALF-TONE

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Aimery de Pierrebourg,
Marguerite
The martyr of love, the
life of Louise de La
[1914]

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

CLAUDE FERVAL'S *Un Double Amour* first came to me among a batch of books for review, and it appeared to me so beautiful and understanding a telling of the life story of a woman, a figure of romance from her poignant suffering, a figure of bewilderment from her apparent contradictions, that I resolved to attempt the task of translating it into English. It is, of course, evident that the more a book is distinguished by its style in the original, the more it must lose in translation. I cannot pretend that *The Martyr of Love* is more than a shadow and suggestion of *Un Double Amour*. Claude Ferval is essentially French in her thought, French in her expression. Literally to translate so French a writer into English would be merely to produce a banal burlesque. My business has been to attempt to make an English book which should convey to the reader something at least of the beautiful and sympathetic picture of the girl-mistress of Louis XIV, drawn by a Frenchwoman of exquisite sensibility. All that Jean Richepin says of the original is more than justified. If it

may be found that some part of the eulogy can properly be offered to the English version, I shall be content.

To me the attraction of Louise de La Vallière lies in the fact that her life is a repetition of the great truth (the truth before which all other truths are matters of small moment) that love is always beautiful and mysterious and ennobling. Deserted by the King, Louise turned to the love of God. To the superficial that may appear a reflection on God, but the superficial are damnably silly. It is the function of God to love, and only by love can man discover God. It is humanity's hall-mark of divinity that there is no essential difference between the love of a mother for her child, of a lover for his mistress, of a patriot for his country, and the love of a saint for his God, and all love is summarized, glorified, and made significant in God, who is love. Louise de La Vallière, like Mary, was the complete lover. To love was her function. It was all that she could do, and when the thin love of Louis XIV failed her she found refuge in the infinite love of God, journeying from the lesser to the greater, from the imperfect to the divine.

Some men and women cannot love at all. They are the Tomlinsons for whom there is no room in either heaven or hell. Most of us can love a little, and our souls may yet be saved. But the great lovers are the children of the Most

High, and in the high heavens, among the saints and martyrs, I believe there are places reserved for Romeo and Juliet, for Dante and Beatrice, for Tristan and Isolde, and, too, for poor bruised Louise de La Vallière, and for blundering Dick Swiveller and the grubby Marchioness.

SIDNEY DARK

TAPLOW,
January, 1914.

PREFATORY NOTE

I FIRST met the lady who writes under the name of Claude Ferval at a crowded society function, where I did not even have the opportunity of being introduced to her. But her appearance—the charm of her personality—fresh as it was to my eyes, awakened my eager curiosity, and my interest was unusually acute. Her face held me by its exquisite originality, and I said to myself, "Here in modern Paris is a heroine of the Fronde!"

She had so completely and so unconsciously the "grand air," the bearing of a princess, and in looking at her I thought at once of those romantic amazons who drew the teeth of Mazarin.

For a moment reality lost itself in my poet's dream. The hat from the fashionable milliner's disappeared, and I actually saw Claude Ferval in the feathered felt of the "Grande Mademoiselle," and I felt inclined to bow low before her and ask her to tell me one of the unpublished chapters of her memoirs.

The poet's dream was no mere dream. It was the reality which so often in the end forms itself

from the poet's dream. Here is the proof, this book of which I knew nothing, but of which my dream was a prophecy.

Louise de La Vallière belongs to history—the Angel of Touraine who made splendid the youth of Louis XIV, the favourite for whose sake we forgive all other royal favourites. The serious historian must perforce tell the story of her life, but only the writer of romance can really tell it as it should be told.

For if Louise de La Vallière belongs to history, she belongs no less to romance—the woman essentially chaste and with the soul of a saint, the martyr to a love comparable only to the love for a god, the girl who never really lost her innocence and who remained amid the intrigues and corruptions of a court a marvel of simplicity and purity.

If her story is to be made completely intelligible it must be told by a writer with a romantic imagination, and at the same time with a complete knowledge of the facts and a complete understanding of the intrigues and corruptions of the Court of Louis XIV.

The novelist must have the patience to disentangle many tangled skeins, to labour through endless manuscripts, to compare contradictory authorities, to study letters, documents, memoirs, gossip and facts. The historian must possess the spiritual understanding necessary to make the

reader realize the soul of this great lover, unparalleled in all history, as well as the no less individual soul of the King, who has remained for all time "le roi non pareil."

We must remember that Louise de La Vallière is the woman of whom even the terrible Bussy-Rabutin, for once discarding bitterness and slander, wrote: "She loved the King so well, that it was obvious she would have loved him as much had he been a simple nobleman and she a great queen."

God was the King's only rival, and she expiated her human love with cruel penances and harsh convent punishments. The victim of *The Martyr of Love* remains a type of absolute love. She was a great mystic, in her own way comparable to Saint Teresa.

If we would actually understand Louise de La Vallière, we must understand the essentials of the man whom she loved with fervour and idolatry, and who demanded such love as a right. He was no poseur. He believed that he was placed high above common humanity, and this sincere belief was fatal to his chance of common human happiness. It was Louis XIV, the representative of God on earth, who after the defeat of Malplaquet ingenuously remarked:

"Has God then forgotten all that I have done for Him?"

Can the mere historian, from the grey dust of

dead documents or from the flash of such sentences as these, re-create for us the souls of a man and woman whose life was lived in an atmosphere so alien to ours, an atmosphere too rare for us to breathe ?

No novelist of our day would dare to invent a story so romantic, so unreal, and so improbable, unless, indeed, he did it as a wager against common sense and as a masterpiece of absurdity.

But where romancer and historian would have feared or failed, the author of *The Martyr of Love* has attempted, and with unconscious effort, or rather really without effort at all, has succeeded.

Success has not been achieved without labour. Documents, papers, authorities, arguments, commentaries, and the rest, rustle between the lines of the book. Nothing is invented. This is no mere fiction. The pages bristle with notes and references.

But who would weigh the text of such a book. It is sufficient that it is alert, animated, fed on facts, quivering with feeling, with understanding, with suffering, wet with tears, shaken with sobs which grip the heart of the reader.

The Martyr of Love is a solid historical study and a passionate romance. It is as poignant as life itself. It is, indeed, actually life ; the life of Louise de La Vallière as she lived, and wept, and bled.

And as one reads, it seems that the book must

have been written by one who had witnessed its events, one who knew Louise de La Vallière, who had sounded her reasonings, who had guessed her secrets, who had heard her innermost confidences and intimate confessions, and who understood the mysterious depths of a soul akin to her own. The writer has become by a marvellous magic her subject's contemporary, affected by the same sentiments and the same ideals, moved by the same absolute faith in love, environed by religion.

The poet's dream was justified when Claude Ferval appeared to him as a seventeenth-century heroine, and when he felt inclined to ask her for an unpublished chapter of her memoirs. She has risen above this desire ; for she has written at the dictation of a woman's heart the actual memoirs of Louise de La Vallière.

JEAN RICHEPIN

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THE MARTYR OF LOVE

CHAPTER I

THE DAWN

TOURS, among all the charming villages and peaceful well-built towns that nestle on its banks, is the jewel of the Loire, and it was at Tours, in a comfortable mansion, that Louise de La Vallière was born on the 6th August, 1644. Her parents, Laurent de la Baume le Blanc and Dame Françoise le Prévôt de La Coutelaye, had her taken on the day after her birth to the church of Saint-Saturnin, where by a strange coincidence she received the name of Louise in baptism—for to be christened Louise is to be placed under the patronage of the kings of France.

Her childhood was passed peacefully between the fortress of Amboise, of which her father was governor, and the modest country-house of her ancestors. The home of the La Vallières, with its painted roofs and ornate windows, was built by the architect who planned Chambord, on the side of a hill on the banks of the Brenne. There

is a delightful view from it over the little village of Reugny. The sun lingers there, and undulating meadows stretch like a soft green carpet from the threshold of the house to the river.

The La Vallières, who came one after the other to this home, always felt its charm. Each one loved it and found pleasure in adding to its beauty. On its walls hung dainty pictures of the simple life of the country-side—here a village fête with the peasants dancing the "bourrée"; there a young girl wandering in the fields with her dog. Peace and the gentle restfulness of the country lived in these pictures, and it was with them that Louise grew up with that extreme sensibility which was the keynote of her character. With each changing season her love increased for this quiet country, the cradle of her race, with whose quiet harmonies her temperament was in complete accord. Her first childish dreams hung on the frail birch trees. She loved the great silver distances which make men free and proud, and the flowers that teach them to be good. The animals were her friends, and the village children, as soon as winter came, were warmly clad in clothes she knitted for them. All the roads were familiar to her. She wandered along them with her parents, or hand in hand with her brother, Jean-François, three years her senior. There was not a path, not a vineyard, which did not say something to her young soul. The autumn winds

that scattered the leaves of the forest and filled the sky with clouds, and the crickets that chorused the return of summer, all whispered to her : " You are happy here ; never go away. Everywhere else there is danger and peril."

Even the ancient stones had their tales to tell. They told of the honour of a family grown old in the service of the fatherland. Some of them were carved in the image of her more celebrated ancestors, whose virtues had made the family illustrious—Perrin le Blanc, the companion of Jeanne d'Arc ; Jacques, who went as a missionary to India and died a martyr's death there ; Charles and Louis, whose bodies were left on the battle-fields of Pavia and Marignano ; and, more recently, François de la Baume, Lieutenant-General of the Royal Army, who died at the siege of Lherida at the age of twenty-six. His motto, inscribed over the mantelpiece in the great hall, was : " Ad prinsipem ut ad ignem amor indis-solubilis "—prophetic words which the destiny of Louise was so strangely to fulfil.

The education given to young girls at that time was neither varied nor extensive. A few rudiments of history, what was then known of geography, French, sometimes a little Latin—that was all. Faith took the place of knowledge, the Christian faith. It is not easy to realize the power of this wonderful teaching on a mind that is just awakening. It embraces everything : affirmations,

promises, the story of whence we have come and where we are going. In its light the whole universe is revealed. We know what powerful hand is at the wheel. And that is not all. To a young imagination the Scriptures unroll their marvellous incidents—here glittering and dangerous Eden, the archway where the doves fluttered, the exodus of the chosen people. Then the Gospel, that wondrous poem from which the heart learns to love—Bethlehem, with its wise-men and its shepherds, the house at Nazareth, the temple where Jesus taught, the Garden of Gethsemane, Calvary, the lakes, the mountains, all the radiant Eastern scenes. Who can describe the fragrance with which they have charmed our childhood ?

The childhood of Louise was particularly inclined to receive the seed of faith. Being all tenderness and candour, she was the ideal soil in which the seed could flourish. Her quick intelligence and her precocious sensibility, attracted by all that was pure, became impregnated with prayer as with dew. It was her food and her drink. Religious observances became a habit before they were a necessity. She loved God before she knew the meaning of love, because of her natural inclination to strive to rise towards all that was most noble and most worthy of adoration. If she opened the window in the morning the first thing that met her young glance was the steeple of the parish church with its

pinnacle pointing to the heavens, and the soul of Louise linked itself to this stone parable, and passed it on the road to the stars.

Even if her parents had not attended to their religious duties, there was someone else who seemed to have been given a special mission to cultivate in her the mystic rose, which was one day to bloom so magnificently. Gilles de la Baume le Blanc, afterwards the Bishop of Nantes, passed the greater part of the year at his brother's house. There is no doubt that the society of this priest contributed greatly towards creating an atmosphere of piety in the manor-house of Reugny, and that the young soul, just taking shape, was profoundly and permanently impressed by him. One thing is certain; if before the age when one's convictions acquire their full force, Louise had not been taken away from the influence of her family, if she had remained in the country, if the bells of her village church, the breeze that caressed the valley, the familiar murmur of the water against the wheels of the mill, if all these friendly and wholesome voices had not ceased too soon to be heard, she would never have strayed from the paths of virtue and of God. Without doubt, she would have married some poor country squire and would have become a simple châtelaine. What sufferings she would have been spared! . . .

But, no matter what her exile may lead her to, or however artificial and poisonous the soil

into which she may be transplanted, the perfume of her first years will remain with the little maid of Touraine. She will be like a bush which has been transplanted, which, after having drooped and suffered, finally lifts up its branches and triumphs, because at the end of its roots a little of the good soil has remained.

Louise had scarcely reached the year of her first communion, when her father, a faithful servant of the monarchy, died, leaving her and her brother to the care of a frivolous mother who did not take much interest in them. Before two years had passed, tired of living in the country, tired above all of widowhood and a small income, Madame de La Vallière married again, for the third time. Her last husband, Jacques de Courtarvel, Marquis de Saint Rémy, a gentleman of noble family, but without much strength of character, held the appointment of first *maître d'hôtel* in the household of the Duc d'Orleans. Profiting by the interest of the Duchess and with his wife's consent, he arranged that Louise should become lady-in-waiting to the young princesses, as his own daughter already was.

The little Court of Gaston, the second son of Henry IV, was neither sumptuous nor amusing, and its dull life was passed within the precincts picturesque in a severe style, of what is to-day known as "Le Château." It might well have been called "Les Châteaux," looking at it from

the centre of the courtyard of honour, with its incongruous walls which seemed to have been gathered there as specimens of the different styles of the centuries. The elegant square of red brick, where the porcupine of Louis XII alternated with the ermine of Anne of Brittany, contrasted strangely with the white wing said to belong to the period of François I, a masterpiece of stone-work, in which the bold and varied art of the sixteenth century came into play.

It was here, old and deprived of the Lieutenant-Generalcy of the Kingdom, by which his thirst for power had been for a time assuaged, that the uncle of Louis XIV atoned for a life of intrigues and plots. "Since the failure of his last plot," said Madame de Motteville, "he was in that disgrace which puts a man among the dead, before he himself is really dead." His second wife, Marguerite of Lorraine, had not the temperament to combat his morose spirit. Disappointed by her husband's repeated failures, she only thought of prayer and of fighting her own moodiness.

Three princesses were born of the marriage, and they were intelligent, pretty, and romantic. Their mother, who troubled more about herself than about them or their bringing-up, saw them but rarely. A quarter of an hour in the morning, and about as long in the evening, just long

enough to say: "Lift up your head," "Hold yourself erect," the only things that mattered in the least in her eyes.

The arrival of a new companion was a great event to these young girls. They studied Louise, at first suspiciously, but the impression was favourable. The country mouse appeared to them a little simpleton, very innocent and strangely shy; but her face was charming and her manners gentle and affectionate. They made friends with her, and Marguerite, the eldest, who was the same age as Louise, and whose head was full of all the desire, all the ardour, and all the curiosity of youth, soon made her her confidante. The taste for reading which they had in common helped to bring them closer together. They were often to be seen slipping into the library of the château, to come out after a long time, or, if they came out at once, bringing away some volume with them.

This library, started with the greatest care by Louis d'Orleans and Valentine of Milan, who mourned him with the memorable words: "Rien ne m'est plus, plus ne m'est rien," had been considerably improved by their son Charles, the poet who wrote the well-known lines:—

Le temps a laissé son manteau
De vent, de froidure, de pluie,
Elle s'est vetu de brodérie,
De soleil cler et beau.

In his turn, Gaston d'Orleans, in exile, consoled himself with the library. He turned over the leaves of the old volumes engraved in gold and covered with dust, and remembered that he had been the friend of Voiture, de Vaugelas and the patron of La Fontaine—and added new books to the old. There were on these shelves poetry and romances calculated to disturb young minds. Without anyone to hinder them, Marguerite and Louise, with the appetite of youth and ignorance, devoured many pages that were not written for them. How dangerous, we should think, to allow young girls to read at random, and one shivers at the thought of such a thing happening in our time. But we may be reassured. The literature of the early seventeenth century, though it dealt with unpleasant subjects, had no tendency to pervert truth. Indeed, the contrary was its characteristic. The romances of La Calprenède, of Gomberville, of Mlle. de Scudéry, and particularly of the celebrated Astrée, who was still the vogue, contained nothing but scenes of splendour, courage, and heroic adventure. Love, it is true, held a large place, but it was chivalrous, ideal, more calculated to exalt than to corrupt. The nobility of sentiment made up for the fact that it was sometimes excessive. It was assumed that it was useless to fight against the passions, and that their victim could not be cured, death alone delivering him—a dangerous

doctrine enough, printed on the imaginations of fifteen! Love became the only thought of the young readers, the object of their aspirations, of their desires. "To love," they sighed, "to adore a man and to accomplish the impossible for him! To whisper to his heart a secret which would arm him and give him courage!" The only thing left was to meet someone worthy of such worship.

Whatever wonderful exploits were accomplished by the great Cyrus, by Lancelot, by Abrower, there was one figure that surpassed them all: that of young Louis XIV. Although still far from possessing the prestige which his unparalleled reign was to give him, the personality of the sovereign already attracted keen interest. Born after the long waiting of his people and in answer to the vow of Anne of Austria, it seemed as if his name, "Gift of God," was a prophecy. His glorious minority saw the victories of Rocroy, of Lens, of Fribourg. The Treaty of Westphalia had terminated the Thirty Years' War and had given Alsace to France. Spain, weary of struggling, was on the eve of signing the Treaty of the Pyrenees and ceding Artois and Roussillon. Never was dawn more full of promise. In addition, Louis was handsome. Not tall, though he appeared to be, supple, robust, splendidly built, his figure was that of a hero. Superb curly hair framed his regular features. He had a character-full nose,

a disdainful mouth, and half-closed eyes, whose glance inspired fear. Naturally proud, which appeals to men, he also had an air of subtle gallantry which gained him the approbation of women. His manners were grave and deliberate. Prudence tempered his courage. "There was something about him," Saint-Simon assures us, "that distinguished him amongst his courtiers as the King Bee." To complete this picture, he danced admirably, there was not a horseman at the court who was a better rider, he drove courageously, in everything he attempted he stood out the superior of all the nobles by whom he was surrounded.

All these particulars were carried to Blois by his cousin, Mademoiselle — restless, combative Mademoiselle, the Grande Mademoiselle, Mlle. de Montpensier, daughter of Monsieur by his first marriage. All there is to tell of this strange figure has been told, particularly in her famous memoirs, where sincerity takes the place of talent. We can easily picture her occasional and always hurried departures from Paris, the tramp of her escorts' sabots on the bridge that crosses the Loire, and her arrival in the midst of her quiet family. Her costumes were loud, her heels were high, and her walking-stick resembled a sceptre. Her immense be-feathered hats disgusted her step-mother, almost as much as the two greyhounds that were always with her. As soon as she

arrived the rooms were filled with noise and movement. The *salons* were lighted up, and the footlights were fixed in the theatre, for, regal in her habits, the Grande Mademoiselle always carried a troupe of actors in her suite.

If these visits were not always agreeable to Monsieur, with whom she persistently started bitter arguments about her trust money, the accounts of which had been very much neglected, she was, on the other hand, warmly welcomed by the three little princesses, who were bored with life at a Court out of the world. She brought them, for a few days, an escape from exile, and the echo of Parisian amusements and extravagance. Their big sister told them wonderful stories, and they listened greedily, whether they went back to the warlike epoch when she won battles, or were concerned with intimate details of the young sovereign's life.

The interest of the young audience was redoubled when Mademoiselle told them the story of the Mazarins, the surname given to the Demoiselles Mancini, the nieces of Cardinal Mazarin, who bewitched the King—Olympe, good-looking, but stout, with a full throat, and with the wit of an angel (it would perhaps be truer to say of a demon), and Marie, lively, dark-complexioned, with the air of a barmaid, whom Louis had loved as perhaps he would never love again. It was gossiped that he had nearly married her, and that

if it had not been for the intervention of the Queen-Mother, this intriguing Italian would have become Queen of France. How eagerly the young girls listened—Louise de La Vallière as well as the Princesses d'Orleans, d'Alençon, and de Valois, how they gazed with awe at Mademoiselle, and how they envied this princess who saw Louis XIV every day! She appeared to them like a traveller who had returned from distant lands and who had seen countries which they longed to visit. But alas, they were too far away! And when the tale had ended, and the little court had returned to its provincial monotony, of what and of whom did they talk. It is easy to guess. Of him! Always of him—the invisible star whose light they awaited. Particularly Marguerite, whom the ambition of her family had marked out for the royal alliance. "La petite reine," as they loved to call her, could talk of nothing but the King—to be the wife of such a young hero, to live at his side always, to wear a crown and dresses worked with gold and pearls! "Why not," asked her father, her mother, and her sisters? And her looking-glass reflected her ravishing beauty, and repeated: "Why not?"

Free to roam about a palace filled with young officers, without any surveillance, many of the Maids of Honour naturally became involved in love affairs. Although Gaston d'Orleans did not pay much attention to what went on in his

household, he suspected certain friendships. Having become a moralist in his old age, he severely reprimanded the youth of the château, but after these general reprimands he invariably added: "As far as Mlle. de La Vallière is concerned she is exonerated from any blame, she is too modest to have taken part in all this impropriety."

This was the impression that Louise made from her earliest youth. It must not be assumed that she, any more than the others, was free from temptation. Pretty, and growing every day more and more seductive, with her expressive eyes, her sweet mouth, and her fair silvery hair, she had many admirers. One of them, at least, fell seriously in love with her. This young man, who was a captain in the Duc d'Orleans' Guard, was of noble birth and of agreeable appearance. The name of La Vallière could ally itself with that of Bragelongue without lowering itself. His proposal was made. Louise was not, strictly speaking, a coquette, but she was very much a woman. She had the desire to please as well as the gift of pleasing, and her little head was full of romance. She wanted a love affair of her own. A correspondence began between her and the handsome officer; innocent, of course, but without any definite prospects. The love letters continued. Who can tell what might have happened but for the dramatic intervention of circumstance?

There was a sudden rumour of peace from one

end of the kingdom to the other, and as a matter of fact, peace with Spain, the negotiations for which had been hanging fire so long that all hope of their coming to a head had been abandoned, was on the point of being concluded. The hand of the Infanta Maria-Teresa, it was said, was to be the pledge.

This was sufficient to throw the Orleans family into a state of consternation. For the Duke and Duchess it was the end of their most cherished project. For the Princess Marguerite, it was a fearful disappointment! Mlle. Montpensier also had built castles in the air. It was certainly not her wish that her younger sister should succeed where she had failed, and she had, therefore, always looked upon the marriage scheme with disfavour. With the sincerity which is characteristic of her copious memoirs, she does not attempt to deny this fact: "They had at the time great hopes of marrying my sister to the King. For my part, I neither believed in the possibility nor did I desire it. It is not pleasant to have one's younger sister raised above one's head. I would rather the King chose a foreign princess than my sister." We are indebted to her also for telling us the Queen-Mother's sentiments, expressed to her without any fear of offending her family pride: "I really feel sorry that Monsieur should think that I would wish my son to marry your sister; it would be sufficient for me that she

were the daughter of Madame to make such a thing impossible; but her personality, her disposition, and her manners are odious to me, and I would rather kill my son than see him married to her."

A little while after, news came that the King was starting to the frontier to meet the Infanta. Accompanied by the Queen-Mother, the Princesse de Conti, the Princesse Palatine, and a numerous suite, he halted at Blois, and in spite of its sorry state, the little D'Orleans Court was obliged to make the best of it and prepare a reception worthy of its great guests. A shoot was organized in the park of Chambord. The King being a good shot, as his father had been before him, shot forty pheasants, much to the disgust of Monsieur, " who was very fond of his game and would have preferred to keep them for himself." Marguerite d'Orleans did not take part in the sport, nor did her sisters nor Louise de La Vallière. All four had been left at Blois, where preparations were being made for the evening reception.

The King reached the château at nightfall, amid the clanging of bells and the waving of torches. His carved and gilded coach with its scarlet wheels was drawn by six horses, harnessed in red leather and with their manes plaited with ribbons. He alighted in a complete, respectful silence. He was young, well-made, and his animated face looked fresh and rosy after the day

LOUIS XIV

From the original in the Versailles Gallery

in the open air. In his short coat of brown cloth, wearing on his curly hair a plain, three-cornered hat, he might have been mistaken for a simple nobleman on his travels, but for the air of majesty which always distinguished him.

It was of course a great privilege for the little Court to receive the sovereign, and they were waiting in the courtyard in full force, arranged in order of rank. Madame bowed and was warm in her welcome. It was then Princess Marguerite's turn to meet the man whom she had hoped to receive as a fiancé, and to speed him on his way to another bride! Mademoiselle, who cannot be accused of being fond of her younger sister, and whose ambition had clashed with hers, could not help agreeing that it was pitiful to see her. After supper, the Duke and Duchess, not knowing what to do to amuse their guest, decided to leave him in the hands of Marguerite. She was grace itself, and her reputation as a dancer had reached Paris. She begged to be spared the pain of amusing the man who had disdained her! Moreover, mosquito bites had disfigured her face. She implored, she made excuses. But the King was waiting; she must perform. She did so, stiffly and sullenly. The astonished Parisians asked if this was the wonder they had heard so highly praised. The disapproval with which she felt herself surrounded completed Marguerite's discomfiture. She longed to disappear, to fly from the mocking faces, and she

hastened to hide the shame of her failure in her own rooms. A gentle friend awaited her there. There was no one who could better understand an aching heart than Louise de La Vallière, and the two girls fell into each other's arms.

It was in the midst of these scenes that Louis XIV first appeared to her whose life he was destined to ruin. The impression that he made was deep and lasting. Louise saw the man before the king. Behind the powerful monarch she saw the seductive, handsome youth. The master of force and grandeur was that day eclipsed by the lover, and this first memory was always to remain.

Circumstances were soon to place the young girl again in the presence of Louis ; but no longer in the atmosphere of family life and love-sick tears in which she had first seen him. She saw him this time in the imposing and majestic light of a sovereign acclaimed by his people. It was during the fêtes which took place in Paris in honour of the royal marriage at the church of Saint-Jean-de-Luz. These fêtes were without precedent. Louise watched them from a window in the Faubourg Saint Antoine. She was nobody then—very poor and quite forgotten behind the backs of the princesses, but her dazzled gaze took in every detail. Since the morning the city had been filled with crowds of men-at-arms, horses, and carriages. A frenzy of joy invaded the streets and houses.

There was not a wall or a house that was not decorated or did not display a flag. Cannon thundered. The procession left the Place du Throne. It approached with outriders in gold, riding lance in hand. As it was passing, the shouts of the people mingled with the bells. Fleurs-de-lis were scattered before them. Captive birds were let loose and their plumage made long trails of colour in the sky. It almost seemed that all this splendour, these canopies, these arches, the blowing of trumpets, celebrated the coming of some hero of Olympus!

Never had the little provincial conceived anything like this scene! The only thing she could think of to compare with it was the procession at the feast of the Holy Sacrament, when the whole population of Touraine collected together. There was the same June atmosphere. The enthusiastic crowds jostled each other, the sound of hymns delighted the ear. Banners waved with their mottoes fringed with gold, and embroidered in silver. Louise remembered it all, and she felt the same sacred emotion as when amid the children of her village she had walked gravely in her white muslin dress. The same mystery surrounded her. Her nerves were just as highly strung, and when the coach of gold and precious stones passed, drawn by its eight white horses, she bowed her head as solemnly as she would have bowed it to the host. One might have mistaken the one for the

other. So much adoration! So much respect! All this homage seemed offered to some supernatural, almost divine, being, rather than to a man. In fact, was it not believed that God himself placed Louis on his throne? His power was infinite, and his young wife, brought from the distant Escurial, with her forehead weighed down under her idol's diadem, added to the solemnity of the procession.

It was impossible for a young girl brought up in the traditions of monarchy not to have shared the enthusiasm and the universal idolatry which surrounded her. When her father defended the fortress of Amboise against the Fronde she had been an eye-witness of the disasters that war spread throughout the country. Now she was able to share the hopes of a people weary of anarchy and disorder, and turning to their King as to a saviour.

To her, as to the others, this miraculous Louis XIV appeared as the bearer of a providential mission. His name was already synonymous with strength and prosperity. Wonders were expected of him; indeed, were demanded of him. Imagine then, in face of all this, the wild delight, the bewildered surprise, the virgin terror, all the sensations that were to assail little La Vallière on the day when this great monarch deigned to notice her. Her confusion would be greater than Eve's in the presence of Adam, greater even than the

emotions that bowed Mary down when the words of her destiny were pronounced. She would be like Teresa of Avila when her Lord said to her: "Come." With her soul in submission, her hands held out, she accepted her destiny. To the King, resistance was impossible.

CHAPTER II

DAZZLED

GASTON D'ORLEANS had died while these events were happening. His steward, the Marquis de Saint Rémy, with the Marquise and their daughters, followed the fortunes of his widow to the Luxembourg. Discord reigned in this palace, as it did everywhere when the Duchesse d'Orleans was with her step-daughter. They began by refusing to share the same apartments. Having won the day, Mademoiselle led the independent and showy existence which she loved. Without the slightest consideration for Madame, whose shattered nerves had need of quiet and who demanded this quiet with exceeding bitterness, she organized a series of receptions. Since the Marquise de Rambouillet had let fall the sceptre of conversation, no one had arisen with sufficient personality to take it up. The wits, of course, met together ; but without the stimulus of a hostess the delightful art of conversation was being lost ; for real conversation needs an audience to make it bloom, and a setting—that intangible refinement and exclusiveness which constitute a *salon*. It was one of the

glories of Mademoiselle that she was able to gather round her at the Luxembourg wits such as La Rochefoucauld, La Fontaine, Segrais, Mmes. de Sevigné and de La Fayette, and to encourage them to use in its most subtle and limpid form that masterpiece of human genius, the French language of the seventeenth century.

Besides these rather serious gatherings, there were days reserved for the young people. On these days, the three young princesses broke loose from the authority of their mother, and with their ladies-in-waiting hastened to take their revenge for their usual restrictions. They played at blindman's buff and hide-and-seek, and turned the palace upside-down. Then in the evening they always danced. " As I always had musicians in the palace," writes Mademoiselle, " the balls were soon in full swing." The Abbé de Choisy, who was then young, witty, and gay, adds this detail : " There were violins, but we often made them stop playing and danced to our own songs."

The understanding that existed between the sisters was based on the same spirit of revolt against the old Madame, but it was not destined to last long. For the second time the two eldest sisters became rivals. Though one was thirty-three and the other seventeen, they both wished to marry Charles de Lorraine, whose long lashes, feline grace, and exquisite clothes bewitched all the women he met. He made love to them both

—to Mademoiselle because she was rich, and to Marguerite d'Orleans because of her entrancing daintiness. After a while other love affairs distracted his attention, and he married neither of them. The first to console herself was the younger. Quite sure that her wealth and her birth would always bring her brilliant offers of marriage, Mlle. de Montpensier did not care. But "la petite reine," who had once before been disappointed in love, smarted under this second failure, and the disappointment caused her to take a very foolish step. The Grand Duke of Tuscany having proposed for her hand, she jumped at the offer, although he was neither young nor handsome, and she fixed an early date for the wedding, just to show her ungrateful cousin that she did not trouble her head about him. But her heart failed her. No sooner was the agreement concluded than Marguerite regretted it and wished to break it off. She declared that she could never submit. But it was too late! The ambassador of the Medicis had already left Paris with the King's promise. Willy-nilly, the promise had to be kept. The Duke sent presents to his fiancée, and was soon to come and take her away. She wept and was in despair at becoming an exile from Paris. She could not bear the thought of living with this unknown prince in a country whose language and customs were foreign to her! . . . "You will send me

scents from here," she asked. "They make excellent scents in Italy," was all the consolation she received from the Queen-Mother.

Charles de Lorraine, no longer afraid of being entrapped into marriage, renewed his attentions to his pretty cousin. She did not bear malice and was quite ready to listen to him and to be drawn into all kinds of adventures. During the day she went hunting with him, and in the evenings she went for mysterious walks, and those who saw her returning from these expeditions in the woods, "her hair disordered and her clothes torn," did not know what to think.

Mlle. de La Vallière, if she was not an accomplice, was certainly aware of these doings. Devoted as she was to her friend, it was not possible that it could be otherwise. . . . Besides, it is not often that a young girl refuses to help lovers. It was thus at an age when the soul is most impressionable, and when other young girls are protected by their families from the knowledge of the realities of life, that Louise saw everything and understood everything. There was no one to shield her innocence. She grew accustomed to scandals, to easy virtue, and to debauchery. Nobody attempted to save her from the dangers that surrounded her; not her mother assuredly; for her advice would most probably not have led her along the paths of virtue; certainly not the old Duchesse, who was too

wrapped up in herself to trouble about the souls of others. Her brother, it is true, loved her and was entirely devoted to her, but he had already begun to anticipate a brilliant military career. For the moment Louise was alone in the world except for the protection of the Princess Marguerite, and what moral help could she hope to gain from that scatter-brain? She was even to be deprived of her friendship very soon. Once the Princess left, what was to become of her lady-in-waiting? The future seemed lonely and hopeless. She began to wonder if she would not have done better to marry the charming Bragelongue who wrote her such loving letters.

Suddenly the clouds began to disperse. A woman who had once been beautiful, and who was still full of energy and intrigue, came to the rescue. Madame de Choisy, the mother of the handsome Abbé, who used to dress himself in women's attire to amuse Monsieur, had known the "little La Valliére" as she used to call her, during their residence at Blois. Thinking her gentle and naïve enough to further her plans, she decided to make use of her. Her wit had given her a certain influence at Court. She took advantage of this to introduce her protégée and to have her taken into the household of the young Duchesse d'Orleans, which was then being appointed. It was an unhoped-for opportunity for the daughter of Mme. de Saint Rémy. Anyway,

this lady thought so, for in spite of her great financial difficulties she spent a great deal of money, "to give Mlle. Louise-Françoise de la Baume le Blanc the necessary outfit to go to Court," says a legal document. This in simple language means: "to rig her out decently." What a difference between the dull Palace of Luxembourg, where the widow of Gaston d'Orleans insisted on prolonging her mourning long after the regulation term had come to an end, and the young Court of the Tuileries still sparkling with the lights of the marriage feast!

Henrietta of England, "la divine," was married to Philippe d'Orleans, the King's brother, on the 16th of April and was just beginning to exercise her irresistible influence. She won the heart of everybody by her graceful figure—she was as supple as a lioness—and her dainty face, her sweet nature, her gaiety, and her delightful wit, completed the conquest. Having been reduced to comparative poverty by the misfortunes of her family, she had acquired the common sense and humanity which as a rule princesses lack, and added to her new splendour she had a charming personality, which made her one of the most seductive persons it was possible to meet. There was one heart, however, she could not conquer; her husband's—that strange prince, who painted his face and did not care for women, or horses, or hunting, and who only wanted to eat well, to

gamble, to dress himself, and to take care of his complexion, who talked with irritating affectation, and whose fingers were always covered with rings. Hurt by his indifference, which was cruelly unjust to her, Henrietta threw herself into a life of gaiety to try and forget. Having no rivals to fear, her *salons* soon became a centre of amusement and pleasure. Crowds of brilliant women were seen there; Mmes. de Valentinois, de La Fayette, de Soissons, the pretty Mlle. de Pons, the clever Montalais, the wonderful Athenais de Rochechouart-Mortemart, afterwards the Marquise de Montespan, whose youthful beauty was already attracting attention. These fascinating companions made a brilliant setting for the youth and charms of Madame. The flower of the courtiers were to be found with her. Guiche, who was the most elegant, was her favourite, and Vardés was her devoted servant. Buckingham adored her in silence, and every one of them was ready to do her bidding and to sacrifice all that life held most dear for her sake. In the meanwhile each one tried to outdo the other in distracting Henrietta and in offering her the deepest homage.

Paris, wearing its joyous spring gown, collaborated with the efforts of her admirers. The bright clear sky waved scarves of pale blue among the grey clouds. The chestnut trees in the Tuileries added snow-white and purple

crowns to their fresh young leaves. Life seemed made up of frivolity and pleasure. In the morning there was a ceaseless stream of women carrying gaudy band-boxes. The jewellers were very careful and hid their trinkets under their cloaks. The wig-maker was followed by the milliner. In the afternoon wonderfully thought-out costumes were mingled with the gold of the *salons*. The huge tapestry sofas made an imposing circle. Young lords, hat in hand, with their wrists resting on the scabbard of their sword, stood beside the ladies and talked. They discussed the merits of Molière, who had been recently attached to the suite of Monsieur, and who had produced "Les Précieuses Ridicules" at the Théâtre du Petit Bourbon. They talked of young Racine, whose "Ode aux Nymphes de la Seine" written for the King's marriage had attracted much attention. They talked . . . of themselves. This had already become fashionable; and they called it: "drawing one's own portrait." They described their dispositions, their tastes, their tendencies. Even one's faults had to be laid bare; and then they passed on to their physical appearance. They vied with each other as to which of them would be truest to life . . . truest to what they thought of themselves, for we none of us really know ourselves.

These confessions were surprisingly naïve. For instance, it was not unusual for a lady to say

of herself: "I have a beautiful figure, as well made as eyes can ever hope to see," or, "My eyes are brilliant and full of fire and intelligence; my mouth is exquisite."

If the weather was fine they drove in coaches to Vincennes, Chaillot, and Saint-Cloud, and if one could have seen their rosy faces, laughing mouths, and firm, supple necks through the coach doors one would have imagined them a troupe of nymphs on their way to the Island of Cythera.

But the gracious artificiality of the Court was seen at its greatest perfection when the lamps were lighted. The silks and brocades were more suited to minuets, quadrilles, and graceful bowing than to the open air. The courtiers were in their own country when the doors were closed and the curtains were drawn. The tables were laid out and they gambled until the early hours of the morning, winning and losing large sums of money at lansquenet, backgammon, and trente et quarante.

Louis XIV was already tired of his Queen, whose dull *salons* offered a striking contrast to those of Henrietta and it had become his habit to finish his evenings at his sister-in-law's. She received him as the quarry for whom the festivities had been prepared. Games, comedies, dancing, were exactly his idea of enjoyment. She flattered him cleverly, and as he had not

yet reached the time when he was generally to be treated as if he were a god, this foretaste of worship was delightful to him.

Louise de La Vallière, "the little violet," as Mme. de Sevigné called her, was suddenly plunged into this atmosphere of voluptuousness and elegance; this very earthly paradise, this antechamber of greatness, and under the rays of its powerful stars this modest flower, born in the shade, soon began to expand and develop into a full-blown rose.

It was during the summer of 1661, a year of radiant sunshine, that Madame moved her Court to Fontainebleau, to continue, under the shadow of its trees, that "inimitable existence" which another beautiful princess had inaugurated seventeen centuries before. What Cleopatra had attempted to achieve by the green waters of the Nile, Henrietta of England, languidly lying on the cushions of her golden bark, tried to emulate, to the accompaniment of languorous music—to seduce a prince with a susceptible heart, to hold him by the tastes they had in common, to bewilder him, to make him forget.

When Mazarin had suggested to Louis XIV that he should marry the daughter of the unfortunate Charles I, he would not hear of it. Under the spell of the audacious glances of Olympe Mancini and the deeper love of Marie, whose dark eyes and ample bosom promised

thrilling feasts of love, the young man was not attracted by the purity and reserve of his sixteen-year-old cousin Henrietta. "Bones are no good except in the cemetery of the Innocents," he had said, when he was urged to make up his mind. He allowed his brother to marry her before he had realized how blind he had been. He was amazed to see her after a few months of marriage developed and transformed, and he bitterly regretted having scorned her! Henrietta was indeed entirely charming with her supple figure, sparkling eyes, and her incomparable smile, so happily described by the author of *La Princess de Cleves*: "When Madame makes the most banal remark to you, she seems to ask you for your heart."

The King's regret was greater still when he found himself for political reasons married to a chubby, fat little person, without grace or wit, and compared her with the brilliant, witty, gay, and exquisite creature whom he had come to know too late. Was it too late? His amorous attentions indicated that he did not think so.

There is a wonderful picture by Mignard, showing the delights of the Court of Fontainebleau. Dressed as a shepherd of Olympus, Louis XIV is seated on a slope of grass; his naked legs and chest are superb, and his attitude is one of sensuous joy. Standing in front of her ladies-in-waiting, his sister-in-law smiles at him, a

HENRIETTA MARIA, QUEEN OF CHARLES I

diamond crescent glittering on her forehead. The light draperies which fall from her shoulders give her the appearance of a goddess just descended from the clouds. Above their heads cupids weave garlands of roses. A quiver lies at their feet. Both of them appear to be listening to ethereal music.

The queens began to be alarmed. Maria-Teresa adored the King. She loved him in a tactless, tiresome, unattractive way. She wanted him at her side all the time. But how could any woman hope to hold such a husband? No one could have been sweeter or more full of good intentions than this little woman who was still only a child. Ever since she was six years old she had thought of nothing but that she was to marry her handsome cousin of France. She was in love with him before she knew him, and her love grew and became real on the Iles des Faisans when she first had the right to kiss him. The first favour she asked him was a promise that he would remain with her from morning to night, except when he was forced by the pressure of affairs to leave her. He promised. What did it matter? It is easy to promise one's actual presence when one's soul may be elsewhere.

At first the King was faithful to his promise. His intentions were good, and he married with the firm resolution to be "a good husband." It was not long, however, before the Queen realized

that the fact of sharing the same room does not necessarily mean conjugal union. It is very difficult to say with whom the fault lay. There is, however, a presumption in favour of Louis XIV. Why was it that he, who was so susceptible, so affected by the charm of every woman, so long as she was young and desirable, remained indifferent to his own wife? It was not the lack of physical attraction, for Maria-Teresa, with her fair hair, her full mouth, her brilliant, doll-like colouring, was not ugly. Nor was she cold by nature, a fact that the chronicles of the time rather amusingly disprove. "Whenever the King showed her any signs of affection, the Queen was so delighted," said Madame, "that it became a matter of common knowledge. She loved to be teased about it, laughing and winking, and rubbing her hands." It was her want of wit that was the cause of the neglect with which she was always treated. Brought up like an entombed idol in the palace at Madrid, she was entirely ignorant of life and of the existence that she was destined to lead after she left her seclusion, and her want of education placed her at a great disadvantage. However hard she tried, she never succeeded in mastering the French language. After having spent twenty years in France she still said "servilietta" for "serviette," "des eschevois" for "des chevaux," and "Sancta Biergen" for "Sainte Vierge." It was

in this jargon that she tried to reproach the King for his infidelities. One may imagine the effect.

Anne of Austria was more likely to be listened to. Although nearly sixty, she was still beautiful and imposing, with her lovely hair, matchless hands, and essentially aristocratic face, and she had a very real influence over her son. She had determined always to remind him of his duty, and this resolve was increased now by her anxiety for Maria-Teresa. She was very attached to her niece, whom she had always designed to make her daughter-in-law, and it was only natural that she should be distressed to see her constantly in tears. She did her best to persuade her that the friendship between the King and Henrietta was merely fraternal. She did not really think so herself (she was far too experienced), but her mother's love, as well as her religious faith, revolted at the idea of so fearful a sin. Without beating about the bush, and with the severity that was innate in her, she pointed out to the King the danger he was running and begged him to be careful.

Louis XIV was a very respectful son. He had not forgotten the care with which Anne of Austria surrounded his childhood or her self-denial in leaving the government in the expert hands of Mazarin during her regency. He knew that it was owing to her, and to Mazarin, that his minority had been so brilliant and had so well

prepared the glory of his reign. Gratitude as well as respect obliged him to listen to the maternal remonstrances. He listened, indeed, with many promises, perhaps at the moment sincere, but immediately forgotten.

Madame was not likely to be any more submissive. Having just escaped from the restrictions forced on her by her mother, a tragic and impoverished widow, a queen in exile, almost a nun, the young princess had no desire to fall under the sway of a mother-in-law. She, too, listened to her advice with the deference usual to persons of high rank—and continued to go on pleasing herself.

Anne of Austria made several attempts. After having failed in her efforts to persuade Henrietta that the jubilee should be celebrated by a retreat, she tried to let it be known that the young princess was in a delicate state of health and shortly expected to be a mother. Her gloomy counsels did not have much effect on the soul full of joy at having enslaved the King who had disdained her; Henrietta redoubled her frolics. Open-air dances, hunting-parties, torchlight processions, continued under the shade of the old trees planted by the Valois. If the weather was bad she and her guests assembled in the gallery where were hung the masterpieces of Primatice, and these paintings stimulated the favourite amusement, conversation. It is easy to guess on

what subject the courtiers talked. It was surely almost impossible, between the walls where the portrait of Diane de Poitiers reigned an unchallenged queen, to talk of anything but the joy of loving.

Although Monsieur was not in love with his wife, he began to be annoyed. The crowd of vicious courtiers who surrounded him encouraged him in his dislike of the Princess, who had never hidden her disgust of them. There were family scenes, mutual reproaches, and a public scandal was threatened. These. scenes made Henrietta realize her position far more effectively than the Queen-Mother had succeeded in doing. She took the King into her confidence, and they both discussed the necessity of modifying their behaviour at least in appearance. Neither of these two young people was wicked, and they would have shuddered at the thought of gratuitously hurting anyone else. But when one is in a tight corner, one is not very particular what means are used to get out of it ? At any cost they had to get out of their difficulty, and to dispel suspicions which were spoiling their enjoyment.

With a levity, for which her youth was her only excuse, Madame decided on a plan without ever counting the consequences. It was agreed that the King should pretend to make love to one of her ladies-in-waiting. This would divert suspicion and their friendship could then con-

tinue without interference. It only remained to find the right person. Madame's choice first leaned towards Mlle. de Pons or Mlle. Chemerault, who were coquettes, and would therefore probably not be disgusted at the part they were to play. But whether from virtue or because they could see through the scheme, they both fought shy of it. One of them returned to her home, and the other held out persistently against the advances of the King. Only Louise de La Vallière was left, the most innocent of all Henrietta's ladies, whom no one would even suspect of an intrigue and who appeared to be the ideal " bonnet " for her royal mistress.

Louise had, of course, been affected by the atmosphere of a Court where the only thought was to please, to love, and to conquer. She had constantly seen the King who won all hearts. Certainly the thought had never crossed her mind that she might attract this brilliant star revolving so far from her own little sphere ; but in the palace of Fontainebleau, where the restricted space was responsible for repeated meetings, and where dancing and hunting-parties and meals in the open air threw them intimately together, she did not always realize that he was the star. Her eyes saw an elegant, well-built young man, a good dancer, an intrepid horseman, always charming to women, an extremely seductive and attractive person. It has often been said that

Louis XIV was the most accomplished lord in his kingdom. If the pictures of him at the age of twenty-five by Mignard, Le Brun, Nanteuil, and Van der Meulen, are faithful portraits, there is no doubt that he was. His noble brow, his aristocratic features, the elegance of his clothes, and the heroic air which surrounded him, fitted him to shine equally as a soldier and as the leader of quadrilles. He lives for us in statues and busts, as a Cæsar on the threshold of a conquered city.

His manner and bearing were perfect. He had a subtle wit, and with his apparent sincerity and his surprising cunning he had the power of making friends and allies, ready to do everything to please him. He did not speak much, but when he wished to please he knew how to make his words gracious and flattering. He was gallant, without being audacious, and he won the hearts of all women. Saint-Simon, who was not over-indulgent towards him, says: "Had he been just a private individual, he would have created just the same havoc with his love affairs."

The first time that he spoke to Mlle. de La Vallière was to pay her a compliment, and, if the writers and portrait-painters of the time are to be believed, she certainly deserved it. She was more than pretty, with her tender, appealing eyes, her frank mouth, and her fair, silvery hair, and she had a certain air of modesty and honesty

which made her respected as well as desired. But was she really modest or had she repulsed the attentions of Bragelongue, who could only offer her an unpretentious home, because she was aiming at a higher destiny? Louise was apparently not a schemer. If she had loved Bragelongue she would have married him, and without a single regret would have settled down to a provincial life; but this commonplace young man, with his bourgeois virtues, had never been and could never be a lover of any value in her eyes. From the moment she saw the King, all other images were immediately blotted out from her vision, just as artificial light fades in the light of the sun's rays. It cannot be said, either, that it was ambition or foolish pride that were the cause of her passion. The Abbé Choisy, who had known her intimately since her childhood, said, and we have no cause to doubt it, that "she had no ambition and no aim." What was it then that her heart was waiting for? She did not know herself. She was in that state of suspense that always precedes great events. Her serious mind demanded a sentiment as mystic and as profound as the vocation for the cloistered life that she often believed she possessed. Love meant nothing to her unless it meant adoration. Her soul steeped in mysticism knew no half-measures. She aimed always at what was highest and noblest. It has been said that she loved the

King for quite a year before he made love to her. However that may be, she was always willing to talk about him with her friends, Mlles. de la Motte, de Pons, de Mortemart. She had even expressed the naïve wish to them that "he was not of such high rank." With what a sneering smile the beautiful Athénaïs must have received this confidence. She had already begun to cast her eyes round in search of a destiny worthy of her charms.

Louise was dreaming one day in the shade in the garden of Diana; she was deeply moved by the beauty of the fountains, of the palace, and of all the things that surrounded her. A strange uneasiness obsessed her. She thought of the unsurpassable distance that separated her from the King. She was miserable because she felt she was too insignificant to exist in the eyes of Louis. In her young imagination she dreamt of devoting herself to him and of making the most painful and sublime sacrifices to earn his gratitude. A word of thanks from her Sovereign, she felt, would make her faint with joy.

Suddenly she saw him coming towards her along the path bordered with box trees. She could not believe her eyes. What could he be doing there? There was no mistaking the King with his hat with its three feathers, his well-made legs, and his arched feet. A close-fitting tunic of shot silk clung to his body; the linen of his

cravat wound several times round his neck and then fell in a graceful fall on his velvet waistcoat. Louise's heart began to beat violently. If she had had time, she would have run away and have hidden among the bushes. But it was too late! The King had seen her. She thought to herself: "What is he going to command me to do?" And without the least suspicion of the reason that had brought the master of her destiny to her, she blushingly rose. Her muslin dress made a white foam round her and the rays of the summer sun flitted on the foam.

There was no one who could make himself more charming than the King when he wished to make love to a woman. The interview on his part was passionate and lover-like as he laid his homage at the feet of the young girl. She listened. The evening breeze whispered among the tall trees of the forest, the murmur of the fountain sounded like a fairy song. The voice that she heard seemed hardly real and she could not realize that the passionate words were meant for her. Her brain reeled, her mind wandered. Then with sobs in her voice she revealed her great secret: "I love you, Sire! I love you! I love you!"

The surprise and wonder of it! The seducer had come in search of an adventure, had come, indeed, in heartless pretence, and he had found a tiny warm heart which was wholly his. Louise loved him. She had loved him since the very

first day she saw him. There was not a particle of her being that was not all his until her death!

At first he had some suspicion that he was being made the dupe of one of the many intrigues always brewing at courts. But it was preposterous to suppose that Louise was an intriguante. Louis, who had the gift of seeing through people and rightly estimating them, was clear-sighted enough to know at once that he had found a treasure. Neither the dark-skinned Italians, whose boldness had aroused his youthful passions, nor the Infanta, with all her devotion, nor even Madame, had affected him so much. He was charmed, completely charmed.

The comedy was played, but not as it had been intended. While the Court was pursuing its triumphal round to the baying of hounds and the flourish of trumpets, a humble flower was growing into its full beauty unperceived by anybody. Sure of herself and of her charms, Madame did not fear any rival. How could she suspect that the lover who but yesterday was entirely under her spell, and who was acting under her suggestions, was slipping away from her. Louis remained assiduous in his attentions to her. Every day when this great worker had accomplished the work he had set himself to do, he hastened to the terrace to join the ladies, of whom Henrietta was the queen. He accompanied her in all her excursions. He hunted with her.

He was by her side in her gilded bark when it floated down the canal. And in the evening he organized fêtes in her honour. To all outward appearances nothing was changed. But in reality the King had no thought for anyone but La Vallière. In public he contented himself with chatting amiably with her, but as soon as they were alone his tone changed altogether.

One warm and oppressive July evening, it was suggested that the Court should go to the forest to breathe the fresh air, and at once the brilliant gathering drove away in open coaches along the wide, dark roads. As usual the King shared Madame's coach. They gossiped. The young woman had lost none of her animation or her desire to please. She was coquettish and bewildering. Her conversation was full of colour. In a thousand ways she tried to attract his attention. But his manner was not what it had been. His repartees were very feeble. He was absent-minded. She knew that his thoughts were elsewhere.

Suddenly the order was given to stop. Everybody alighted. Under cover of the night couples wandered at their own free will. Louis joined Louise. Side by side they walked along a pathway, and at first they were silent. An awning of leaves formed overhead and they saw the stars through the branches, like magic lights. Gradually they began to talk. Their words were lost

in the mysteries of the forest or perhaps harmonized with the universal song of love which at night rises up from every tree and every blade of grass.

Louis was passionate and sensual and was not accustomed to meet with any obstacles to his desires. His hand encircled the young girl's waist; he was loving and insistent. She, however, came of a family to whom honour was a tradition. She had been brought up with religious principles. By nature she was chaste and virtuous. Her conduct hitherto had been beyond reproach. However dissolute was the atmosphere into which she had been thrown, however strongly she might be tempted by the passion that dominated her, her soul clung to virtue. She feared the wrath of God. The thought of sin and of hell terrified her. Her flesh trembled with fear and at the same time burned with passion. If it had only been possible without offending God to make her beloved happy!

"Spare me!" she implored.

"Am I never to be happy!" moaned the King.

At the very dawn of her love she foresaw the storms and darkness of the end!

Love implored and she did not say no. She did not even try to say it. A blunt refusal was beyond her powers of defence. She took refuge in deploring her weakness. And the walk continued under the peaceful sky.

One day Louis and Louise were overtaken by

a storm while they were seated together under an old oak. The rain came down in torrents—heavy rain that pierced the heaviest foliage. The royal coach had not followed them. Unconsciously the lovers had wandered far into the forest, and now they did not know how to get back. Louise suggested that they should wait patiently until the downpour ceased. If he had only himself to think of the King would have followed her advice, but her clothes were drenched and he was afraid she would catch cold. He took off his large felt hat and put it on her fair hair, and made her run towards the palace. So long as Louise came to no harm, he was indifferent as to what might be said or thought.

Dripping wet, out of breath, they arrived at the palace. Everyone was at the windows, looking at them, and they naturally began to whisper and to wonder. With haughty assurance the King gave an explanation which they were bound to accept; but the great solicitude which he showed for the young girl, who the day before was nobody, gave rise to a thousand comments. And Louise was ashamed and sad. The great, wonderful secret which she had shared with her beloved was a secret no longer.

We do not know the date when Mlle. de La Vallière became the mistress of Louis XIV, but our knowledge of her impulsive temperament and her nature, always ready to give with both hands,

leads us to suppose that her fall was not long delayed. When a woman loves as she did—desperately and irrevocably—she does not hold out for long. What was the good of prolonging the agony of resistance, when from the outset she knew she was beaten and was glad to be beaten. But far from being elated by her conquest, and far from flaunting it in the face of the Court, in the manner of her many successors, she was covered with the confusion of a newly married bride. She remained the same diffident girl, conscious of having done wrong, remorseful, and often yearning to return to the paths of virtue. It is true that her love was stronger than her will, but in abandoning herself to Louis she shrank from blatant publicity. When she left the room that the Comte de Saint-Aignan put at her disposal for her meetings with the King she became again the simple lady-in-waiting in the service of Madame, without position or fortune. "Ni bénéfices ni faveurs" might have been her motto. As she loved the monarch and not the monarchy, all she asked of him was himself. She resolutely refused all benefits or honours. Bussy-Rabutin, who could not be accused of benevolence, paid her this great tribute: "She loved the person of the King so well, that it was clear she would have loved him as much had he been a simple nobleman and she a great queen."

Her wish to remain in the background was, for the first few months, almost entirely respected. Although he was very much in love, Louis had not yet arrived at that later stage of unbridled profligacy in his love affairs which made him resemble an Oriental monarch more than a " very Christian king."

He still tried to show a little attention to his young Queen, and he remembered the respect that he owed to the Queen-Mother. Perhaps, too, he may have felt a little awkward at publicly proclaiming his new love because of the princess whom he had so suddenly forgotten, while she believed he was arranging a mock intrigue to hide his intimacy with her. But he was soon put at ease by Henrietta herself. Either because she was astonishingly inconstant and ever in search of new adventures, or because she guessed her lover's infidelity and wished to jilt him before he jilted her, Madame almost immediately started a love affair with the Comte de Guise, which freed the King from any scruples he might have had on her account.

From that moment what had been rumoured, whispered, and insinuated, began to be talked of openly. The King was as madly in love as he was when he had begged to be allowed to marry Marie Mancini. Some applauded his choice, declared that Louise was kind, loyal, and disinterested, and praised the sweetness of her face

ANNE OF AUSTRIA

After a painting by Simon Vouet

and her gracious and modest manner. But the majority criticised her. The more cunning courtiers began to deplore the advent of a favourite without brilliance, without birth, without any desire to intrigue, who would not be of much use in furthering their interests. They said that "the young lady had pretty eyes and a nice complexion, but that she was lanky, that her cheeks were hollow, and her teeth ugly, and that she had a snub nose." They even go so far as to say, "that she walked badly because she was lame," and they made fun of the King's bad taste :—

Que Deodatus est heureux
De baiser ce bec amoureux
Qui d'une oreille à l'autre va
Alleluia !

We can judge for ourselves from the portraits of Louise painted by contemporary artists. Nocret painted several which leave no doubt as to the beauty of the model. The portrait in the museum at Versailles shows her to us, a woman with clear eyes and a mouth with full, firm lips, at once suggesting goodness and warm sensuousness. Her fair, silky hair falls in curls round her neck. Her throat is rounded. Her hands are like mother-of-pearl, and the folds of the blue cloak which drapes her shoulder enhance their frail beauty. Another portrait represents her as Diana, with quiver and arrows and two

greyhounds following her. Other paintings may be cleverer and better executed than this, but none of them shows to better advantage the elegance of her lines, her air of candour, and her honest, serious eyes with their arresting glance.

They say that this portrait was ordered by the King after a suggestion had been made that the young girl should be painted as the Magdalene, no doubt on account of her wonderful hair. "No," Louis replied; "let her rather be painted as Diana. She is too young for a penitent."

These were strange words to fall from the lips of a lover. It almost seems as if in the first days of happiness he already thought of the hour of expiation. Perhaps he foresaw the time when Mlle. de La Vallière was to yearn for the hardships of the Carmel, and when she would make a picture for herself—bare-footed, her elbows resting on the rock of penitence, with the masses of her hair covering her like a veil.

CHAPTER III

THE HAPPIEST DAYS

IN the meantime the only thought of the royal lover was to arrange new festivities. That summer they were more numerous and more brilliant than they had ever been before. Of all the amusements that she shared with her lover, Louise loved hunting best. It was joy to her to be carried through the forest by her horse, on which she was no more than a feather-weight, to the sound of the horn and with the fresh air beating in her face to exhilarate and bewilder her. She rode without fear and without prudence and with the impetuosity that she displayed in all her actions. Her fearlessness became proverbial. "She spurs her horse forward," writes the Duc d'Enghien, "and not even the men can keep pace with her." Moreover, her riding-habit suited her admirably—and she knew it. The King thought so also; and she was happy to appear beautiful in his eyes! . . . The stock became her to perfection and the three-cornered hat perched on her fair hair, the long skirt, and the riding-coat gave her an attractive martial air.

One diversion followed the other and every hour held its own amusement. There were picnics, balls, illuminations, and the famous ballet. The ballet was brought from Italy by Marie de Medicis with the first opera ; but it did not really become popular in France until the time of Mazarin. At first the performances were vulgar and mixed with grotesque scenes, imitating with execrable taste various physical infirmities. Louis XIV in this, as in all things, had perfect taste. Music was the only one of the arts that he had learned. He loved it ; and therefore he loved dancing, which is the child of music. Before he was fifteen, he had not only danced before the Court, but also in the presence of ten thousand Parisians, who crowded the doors of the Petit-Bourbon to admire him. It is not without a certain amount of astonishment that we picture to ourselves this monarch, so jealous of his dignity that it was said that " his presence inspired a kind of fear " in fancy dress, with his face made up, step-dancing to amuse his subjects. But if these exhibitions had deprived the King of the smallest part of his prestige, he would have avoided them. On the contrary they helped him. He was as clever as a dancer as he was on horseback, and at tennis, and everyone who saw his performances was moved to admire and applaud his talent. Dancing was well calculated to show off the supple grace of his body. Besides, the mythological dances, consisting mostly

of poses, and danced in stately measures, did not make the performer dishevelled. The ballets were one of the features of the early reign of Louis XIV, and whether he appeared as Hercules, or as Apollo, or as a rustic lover, he was always characteristically dignified. At the time of his marriage these entertainments were resplendent; but they reached the zenith of their glory four years later with the famous "Delights of the Enchanted Island," the scene of which was laid at Versailles.

Benserade was the most expert organizer of fêtes. His delightful, sparkling wit, his talent for epigrams, and his sense of humour, made his efforts supremely successful. His knowledge of the world and his perfect tact permitted him to make allusions which were only understood by the initiated, and he was able to please without hurting the feelings of anyone. As he was always on the look out for the latest scandal, he was the first to notice the King's interest in Louise. At that time he was writing the *Ballet of the Seasons*. All the young people of the Court were to appear as nymphs and fauns, and the spirits of the woods. Thinking that it was time to make some public celebration of the new favourite, Benserade wrote a set of his rather indifferent verses for Louise, which, however, were full of point, and which were to be sung at her entrance on the stage :—

Cette beauté depuis peu née,
Ce teint et ces vives couleurs,
C'est le printemps avec ses fleurs
Qui promet une bonne année.

All eyes were at once riveted on the fair nymph. She was covered with confusion and feared for a moment that she would lose her self-control. Her feet gave way under her. But the sight of her rivals watching for her downfall helped her to pull herself together. She would not be outdone by them. She would eclipse them! She would surpass them all in the eyes of the King!

Among her rivals of yesterday were Mlle. de Pons and Mlle. de Chemerault. Among those she feared for to-morrow were Anne Marie de la Motte-Houdancourt, Mme. de Ludre, Mme. de Thianges, Mme. de Monaco, and one who above all others kept Louise on tenter-hooks, Athénaïs de Tonnay-Charente, her friend, and a lady-in-waiting like herself, whose brilliant charms certainly justified her anxiety. This handsome girl, compact of wit and gaiety, had a hundred advantages over the retiring maid of Touraine. By birth, she belonged to the family of Rochechouart-Mortemart, one of the oldest in France. Her father and her brother, the Comte de Vivonne, were personal friends of the King. She was related to the Schombergs and the Montmorencies, and to François Duc de La Rochefoucauld. The wit for which her family was famous had come

as an inheritance to her and her sisters, and hers was the lion's share. As for her beauty, Saint-Simon says : " She was as beautiful as the dawn," and if one can judge by her portraits by Mignard she was a veritable goddess. The red dress she wears discloses a glorious bosom ; the lines of her neck and shoulders are marvellous ; her brow is like polished marble, her nostrils dilate like the petals of a rose ; the movements of her feet and her hands are in perfect harmony. She was a woman born to reign. The King, who could have made his choice of the two girls, preferred La Vallière. He, who had the choice of all the women of his Court, stooped to the humblest and the most retiring. It was odd that this great monarch, with his constant desire to augment his glory and add to his prestige, should have fallen in love with this modest little flower. It was the profound mystery—the mystery of desire which is unaffected by reason. Moreover, at that time, without ever being quite sincere, Louis still possessed a little of the sentimentality which almost succeeded in making him a hero of romance. He was more attracted by pure love than by mere sensuality, and whatever his reason may have been, the King loved Louise sincerely. For the moment his love was entirely and exclusively hers. He was not afraid to declare it openly or to compromise her publicly. She was seen at his side everywhere. His passion for his mistress went so far as to make

him anxious and fearful whether she really loved him. There was no difference between him and an ordinary lover. He even grew jealous. Scandal-mongers had told him the story of her love affair with young Bragelongue, not forgetting to exaggerate the facts. He made scenes about him. He was angry that Louise should have had, even in the past, a thought that was not for him.

Another incident with about as much foundation of truth, and the consequences of which might have been very serious, happened about the same time. It was during the fêtes which Fouquet gave at the Château de Vaux in honour of Louis on the 17th of August, 1661. The King saw on the tapestry of one of the boudoirs the portrait of a woman who resembled Louise, and suddenly took offence. There is no doubt that the superintendent had made love to La Vallière. Whether he was really attracted by her, or whether, being a scheming politician, he wanted to get into her good graces and gain her support with the King, he had on several occasions made passionate declarations of love. It is even said that he tempted her with an offer of twenty thousand pistoles. If such was his idea, it was not really a bad one ; and with many women he would have most likely succeeded. Even without the ready-money consideration, many women, knowing the frailty of royal caprice, would have thought it a prudent move to secure the support of one of the

most powerful men in the kingdom, but it cannot be too strongly insisted upon that Louise was always really disinterested. Whole-heartedly in love with the King, she had no secrets from him, and she told him the incident. Already stirred by Colbert against Fouquet's extravagance, the King was furious. He wanted to have him arrested on the spot, and if it had not been for the intervention of Anne of Austria, who told him that he could not lay hands on his host, the Châtelain of Vaux would have been arrested in his own house. As a matter of fact, the Queen-Mother was very much afraid that the scandal might reach the ears of her daughter-in-law. Anne had, with curious irony, undertaken the task of trying to keep Maria-Teresa in ignorance of her husband's peccadilloes. The poor little Queen needed thought and care, not only for her great, if tactless, love, but also because she was now enceinte.

Anne of Austria used the occasion to give the King a warning. She pointed out how dreadful it would be if the Queen came to know he was deceiving her after one year of married life. She begged him to think of the tears and scenes if she found out, without forgetting that in her delicate state of health a tragedy might result.

Louis would not for the world have done anything to destroy his hope of an heir. On the other

hand, the passion that burnt in him was at that stage when it could not be extinguished. With his usual diplomacy, he suggested a compromise. He suggested that his mother should be his ally, and should maintain the wall of illusion with which Maria-Teresa was surrounded, and that as far as he was concerned she should be indulgent.

There were many reasons why the old Queen was eager to help her son. First of all, she adored him with the tenderness that mothers often have when they have waited long for their first-born. And she, too, had had her moments of weakness. Was she not still mourning the memory of the minister she had loved, and even perhaps secretly married? But, perhaps rather late in her life, she had grown religious, and she found it difficult to resign herself to the part of an accomplice. She preached to Louis and she eulogized virtue. But all her words were in vain. The King could not be converted. He loved too well and his passion was too young. She begged, at least, that he would be more careful, and this he promised. Indeed, the summer passed without anyone exactly knowing how his private hours were spent.

Besides, the Court was much too excited and agitated to be interested in bringing hidden secrets to light. A very important event had just taken place. Fouquet had been arrested at Nantes, and had been taken to the Citadel of

Angers by d'Artagnan. Everyone was dumbfounded, for although the superintendent had a host of enemies, he also had legions of friends. His money gave him this luxury as well as many others. The number of people who had received favours from him was considerable, especially among the great lords. It was said that the Marquis de Créqui had received a hundred thousand pistoles, the Marquis de Brançcas, six thousand, and so on. Even the Queen-Mother allowed him to send her money for her poor. The news that they were bringing this disquieting person's papers to Paris, caused general consternation. The only feeling his friends had at his arrest was the fear of being compromised. And they were. The papers found at his house not only proved that he had lent enormous sums of money, but that many women and even young girls who were supposed to be virtuous had sold him their favours. "From which," says the virtuous Mme. de Motteville, "it became known that Fouquet was as sensual as he was ambitious."

These discoveries made two distinct impressions on the mind of the King. First, disgust of the questionable and corrupt people who surrounded him, and then redoubled tenderness for her who had lived with them but had remained entirely unspoiled. The disinterestedness of the mistress who, since she had given herself to him, refused

to accept favours from him, and even seemed to fear rather than to desire them, seemed something rare and wonderful. He shut himself up with his love as in a sanctuary. He sheltered himself there from the corruption around him and he tried to forget all that was deceitful and venal. His heart was hard by nature, and experience was to harden it still more, but for the moment it was tender and young. With Louise he breathed fresh air after being stifled by a poisoned atmo sphere.

The necessity of keeping up appearances, however, forced the lovers to separate. Madame took possession of the Château of Saint-Cloud, which was the property of Monsieur, but where they had never lived since their marriage, and La Vallière had to go with her. The parting was dreadfully painful. . . . But Louise would have plenty of time to think of the man who was more to her than herself. The Princess was not very fond of her. Though she was too proud to acknowledge it, she bore her a grudge, and she never asked her any service. She was, therefore, free, if it pleased her, to remain in her little attic room. What matter a garret if a big dream fills it !

At the bottom of the flower terrace, the Seine slowly unrolled itself. Beyond lay the thick forest of Boulogne, where the leaves were just beginning to redden, and then Paris, already a great city with its innumerable chimneys dominated by the

stately churches, Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois, the ancient royal parish, the gigantic Notre-Dame which seemed on its way to some magic shore, Saint-Eustache, powerful and squat, and last of all, piercing the sky, the steeple of Saint-Chapelle, the symbol of the purified soul, the soul in prayer. Louise was sad for the first time since that wonderful night in June, when, among the scent of the flowers, her very being had been set on fire. She had been too absorbed to think. Her conscience, which had not had the silence which it needed to make itself heard, began to blame her. It reproached her with having lost her good name. It had all happened so quietly! Yesterday chaste, knowing nothing of passion, and thinking of love as a pale sentiment, now caught, lost, possessed! She was still herself and yet not herself! Someone else filled every place in her heart! She had never felt these things when Louis was with her. The mad joy and the infinite happiness of loving had hidden the heavens and the earth from her! But now the religious sense, which had never ceased to exist in her, forced her to realize her sin. "What have I done?" she asked. And her soul fled over the terraces, the river, the woods, to the threshold of the churches where she had knelt in prayer in the days when she was still innocent. "My God!" she exclaimed, "hast Thou forsaken me? Thou knowest well that I loved Thee, that my heart was given to Thee. All men

seemed to me insignificant and meaningless. But this man! . . . does he not carry on his wonderful face a reflection of Thy perfections?" As Louise meditated, she forgot that she was a sinner. How could the love that had taken possession of her be guilty? Its very depth made it almost a religion. Absence exalted the image of Louis and placed it piously in that chapel of the soul where lovers worship in mystic adoration. The joys that she experienced were, indeed, passionately spiritual.

But the King could not long keep away from her. One morning, unexpected and unheralded, he arrived suddenly at Saint-Cloud from Fontainebleau. His horses were covered in foam, and it was obvious that they had accomplished the journey in one stage. He was weary, but he did not notice it. Among the crowd that had assembled to receive him he looked for the beloved face, the glorious hair, the brilliant colouring that distinguished Louise from her fellows. The lovers only saw each other for a moment that day and then before a large crowd of people. Their joy, however, was complete. Sometimes restraint by its very intensity provides the greater emotion, and they looked upon that day as one of the happiest that they ever spent.

As he had given his word to be careful, Louis did not wish the real reason of his journey to Saint-Cloud to be apparent. He had an excuse

ready. Le Notre had begged his presence, and he declared that as he was obliged to go to Versailles to survey the works, he had only made a slight detour. In reality, his journey had been lengthened by many miles. But what did it matter! . . . Louis was twenty and his desires had wings.

It was not necessary to resort to this device again, for Henrietta, whose restlessness kept her always on the move, soon went back to Fontainebleau. There is no place where the rich autumn tints can be seen to such splendid advantage. The whole forest seems to be in flames from a mysterious fire which burns without destroying. Under a dark and deep light the poplars hold up their torches; the oaks, the beeches, the young elms, sing never-ending scales; the chestnut trees, the first to face the April sun, breathe out their souls, and the lime trees spread a carpet of their sweet-scented leaves.

For Louise and her lover it was paradise regained. Amid its declining beauty they felt deliciously young and full of life. During their long walks they returned to the paths where they had wandered when the trees were green. The scent of the moss and the mists warmed their hearts like wine. On the days of the cold north winds, they sought warmth in the sunny flower gardens. These also had a new aspect. The dahlias had succeeded the mignonette and the heliotrope.

The roses were beginning to be too full blown, and the vine, where the white grapes had hung, was now the colour of rich amber, as if the juice of the grapes had dyed it while they ripened.

When the lovers were not together, they wrote letters to each other. This correspondence has unhappily disappeared, for judging by the letters penned after Louise's repentance, no woman in love could have known better how to put her passion into words. It is said that the King's replies were written by Dangeau. But this we cannot believe. Louis was a lover possessed of a sentimental nature which felt the desire of expression all the time. He must have written his letters himself, if only from the necessity which forces a lover irresistibly, as soon as he has left his mistress, to speak to her again and to repeat the things that have already been said. Happily, Louise read as she wrote, without suspicion. Sure of her own heart she did not doubt the heart of him who answered her. She had no fears for the morrow. She was so entirely absorbed by the present that it hid the future from her. Besides, is not the lover's name for the future, "eternity"? In the years to come, which were to give her honours and titles, and wealth, and to make her a royal favourite unmatched in history and envied of all women, if she had been asked which was the happiest time of her life,

LOUISE DE LA VALLIÈRE

the time that left her the most wondrous memories, she would have said this month of October, 1661, the month of her great secret, when she was still obscure and ignored, and when the King had given her nothing but his heart.

CHAPTER IV

THE FIRST CLOUDS

THE birth of the Dauphin brought Louis back to the Queen for a time. Even with the least united couples, a man cannot be insensible to the tortures that for a few hours make his wife the most unhappy of women. Maria-Teresa was not used to pain and did not bear it bravely. She moaned when the pangs came to her: "I don't want a child, I want to die." And nature very nearly took her at her word. Her life was in danger, and the King, who could not help her in any way, made confession, took communion, and was very penitent with the repentance created by fear. Towards night the crisis passed, and after having expressed his gratitude to the mother by kissing her on her two plump little cheeks, Louis took his son in his arms and from the balcony which looks on to the old courtyard, called the Cour de l'Ovale, he presented him to the people, who received him with shouts of joy.

It was rumoured that day that the King had reformed, and the hours which he spent in the

sick-room really gave that impression. He was full of attentions to his wife, and as he bent over the cradle of their son he seemed to be thinking of nothing but his great responsibilities. From his wife's room he was seen gravely going to the Council of Ministers, where he spent long hours with Lionne, and Colbert, working like the real head of the State. It was believed that he had finished with the frivolities of youth, with pleasure, with trivial love affairs. In future he would be a model sovereign, faithful to his wife and entirely devoted to the interests of the Kingdom.

The illusion did not last long. He had no sooner returned from the pilgrimage to Notre-Dame de Chartres, that custom imposes on Kings of France after the birth of their first-born, than he rushed to the Tuileries, where Madame was in residence. It is easy to understand with what agony La Vallière awaited him. She with the rest of the world had heard of his religious fervour, and of the tenderness he had shown to Maria-Teresa. She was not ignorant of the importance of the birth of a Dauphin and the changes that such an event might make in the heart of any king. Louis, they said, had become another man, a reformed husband, and a devout Christian. Had he ceased to love her ? Their first meeting put her mind at ease. " The *salon* where they met," Mme. de La Fayette relates, " had all its doors

open; but they were no more likely to be disturbed than if they had been bolted."

From that time, their liaison became, if not public (this did not happen until after the death of Anne of Austria), at any rate without its official secrecy. People talked—still in undertones, but in tones that grew louder day by day. They wondered if this new caprice of the master was one to be reckoned with, or whether he would tire of Louise as soon as he had tired of the others. The ill-natured whispered that a woman of obscure birth, without much wit, of questionable beauty, and lame on the top of it, would never be able to hold the King's heart for long. Others, more clear-sighted, realized the fascination of the girl, both passionate and modest, whose only thought was love. But these, too, were hostile to her. They cared nothing whether the King was honestly loved. They wanted him to be swayed by a creature of their own, that he might be influenced for their benefit. At the head of these enemies was Madame, who, forgetting her share of the responsibility, could not bear the thought that her lady-in-waiting had been preferred to herself. Then there were Guiche and Vardés, her evil spirits; and above all, the dangerous Comtesse de Soissons. Married during the lifetime of her uncle, Cardinal Mazarin, to Maurice de Savoie, Prince de Carignan, Olympe Mancini owned a magnificent mansion where the King used to go

nearly every evening, before and even after his marriage. Although he was no longer in love with her, he still had kindly feeling towards her, and the sort of gratitude that men sometimes feel for the woman by whom they think they have been loved. Besides, her house attracted him as much by its perfect taste and refinement as by the wit of the frequenters. Since he had become the lover of Louise, the King went no more to the Soissons' hotel. This was enough to excite in the dark soul of Olympe Mancini a hatred of a rival, and a bitter, dangerous envy.

Louise was thus threatened by those who were indifferent and expected nothing from her, and who had at once estimated the extent of the influence she was ever likely to have over the King, and by those who were jealous and envious of the favours shown her. She was by nature reserved and proud, incapable of making friends because they might be useful to her, or of helping the friends she had, and she was left isolated and alone. Plots were hatched against her and she knew nothing of them. Never having harmed anyone, she could not understand why anyone should be eager for her downfall. Too innocent to be suspicious, she was generous enough not to desire to be revenged on her enemies even when she found them out. Everywhere else but at Court her nature would have made her many friends, but in that land of lies, where sentiments

and friendships were all a matter of self-interest, her fine qualities were merely a weakness and a disadvantage.

The story of the intrigues by which La Vallière was surrounded would make a book in themselves. They poisoned her happiness, compromised her, and hastened her ruin. The audacity of her enemies, which increased with the failure of their attacks, went so far as to threaten her life itself. The Duc d'Enghien in one of his letters to the Queen of Poland, which were a sort of diary of the happenings at Court, gives a graphic account of one of these plots. Who the mysterious plotters were remained undiscovered, but the names of the instigators were common knowledge. Their boldness made the King very anxious. Feeling that perhaps her kind-heartedness would induce her to make light of the plots and attacks, he made her swear that whatever happened she would tell him, and only him, everything.

Unfortunately, like all people placed in false positions, Louise's friends were not worthy of her, and were, indeed, almost as dangerous to her as her enemies. Her most intimate friend, Mlle. de Montalais, to whom she had been attached since the days at Blois when they were both ladies-in-waiting to the Duchesse d'Orleans, and who was with her again in the service of Madame, had wit and enterprise, and her general conduct

was worthy of praise, but she was indiscretion personified in woman. By dint of associating with La Vallière and visiting her in the little room where she counted the hours until the arrival of the visitor who came to her only at night, she managed to persuade confessions from her. Louise, of course, was wrong. She was breaking the promise she had made to the King. But she was young and she could not resist the temptation to talk. "I love him! He loves me!" must have escaped from her lips one day before she had time to stop herself.

Mlle. de Montalais was hardly in possession of this secret before she hurried to tell the news to Madame. In exchange, she obtained the confidence of her mistress, who was then carrying on a love affair with the Comte de Guiche, and who told her how they managed to meet. The same day this, in its turn, was related to Louise. It was no small satisfaction for the poor little sinner to know that the Princess who had treated her so badly was more guilty than herself. Another woman in her place would not have failed to inform the King. Besides the mischievous pleasure the betrayal might have given her, she could, to a point, have quieted her own conscience. She had promised not to hide anything from Louis. But Louise had an honest and generous nature. She did not hesitate between her two conflicting oaths. That in her own favour was instantly put

aside; she only remembered the oath made to her friend.

The King, however, always interested in all that happened at his Court, began to have suspicions of his sister-in-law's intrigue. The behaviour of La Montalais, who was ever to be seen gliding from one door to another, made him think it was possible that Louise knew more than she appeared to. He went to her one evening earlier than usual, and questioned her. She trembled and blushed, and her face was that of a prisoner before a judge. But she protested resolutely.

"No. No; I know nothing about the Princess."

To understand the effort required to be so firm, it must be remembered that even when he was not angry, Louis XIV always inspired a sort of fear. He insisted, but in vain. Louise refused to speak. She could not break her word. The King reminded her that she had promised to hide nothing from him. There was silence, during which the royal anger became mixed with astonishment. It seemed to him impossible that anyone should dare to say "no" when he gave an order, and it was even more incredible that this timid, tender creature, who had fallen such an easy prey to his desires, should now find the strength to oppose him.

The King would not tolerate any obstacles. He looked at the young girl with that hard look which made people tremble before him, and which at

this moment meant: "Will you speak? I am waiting." Getting nothing but sobs in reply, he became furiously angry and left, pulling his felt hat right over his eyes, its light feather waving like a cloud of white smoke.

Louise was left alone before her dead fire. The little room which had been her Eden became dark and miserable. She shivered and her tears, drop by drop, fell on her knees.

During the hours of her amazing happiness Louise had sometimes pinched herself or pulled out one of her hairs to make sure that it was really she! To-night, on the contrary, she did not doubt her identity. She prayed that it all might, after all, be a dream!

One thought alone consoled her! Louis and she had promised each other that whatever quarrel they might have, they would never go to sleep without making it up. She tried to persuade herself that he had been carried away by his temper, but that he was just and kind-hearted and generous, and that as soon as he was calmer things would appear to him in their true light. Then he would realize that he was asking for the impossible. She could not betray a friend. He would know that she was waiting and he would certainly not go to sleep before they had made their peace. She was sure he would come back. She fancied she heard him. Every step she heard outside her door gave her hope. It must be he!

But the hours passed. Over the roofs of the old Louvre the clock of Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois had struck midnight. Everything was closed, silent, and dark. The young girl's imagination, fed on romantic stories, made her think of miracles. The Château d'Amboise, where her childhood had been spent, had made her familiar with underground passages and trap-doors. Two o'clock struck, then three. . . . It was too late! Louis was not coming! . . . She was possessed with a sort of madness. She pressed her hands against her heart to prevent it from bursting. She sighed: "It was all too beautiful! I knew I should have to pay. But so soon!"

Worn out, without troubling to take off her dress, without even undoing her boots, she threw herself on the bed. If only she could sleep. But this cowardly wish of those who suffer brought her no relief. After weary hours the framework of her window reflected a band of yellow light across the sky! The day was already dawning! Louise wondered what had happened to her. In the depths of her soul there was blank despair, absolute and without any possible hope. The thought of flight forced itself on her. She would disappear! She would leave the room, the palace, where memories tortured her, and hide herself from the eyes of everybody, from all the enemies who would not fail to jeer when they heard of her disgrace. But where can a woman fly to

who has no one to protect her, who is without relations, and whom love has dishonoured ?

She got up and looked in her mirror. Could that pale face and that disordered hair belong to her ? But even as she was, she was beautiful. A sudden storm cannot strip the young roses ? The periwinkles are not less fresh because the rain has fallen on them. Louise did not think of this. She only saw the havoc of her grief.

This was the end of everything for her. She knew that souls like hers love but once, and then for ever. Once the object of their adoration is lost, there is nothing left but to die or to hide behind the gates of a convent. The convent ! . . . That was the shelter she was bound to seek. No other refuge would satisfy the deep religious bias of her soul, or give her a better hiding-place for her shame or for her heart with its incapacity to change. There, at least, she could give herself up to repentance, and religion might, perhaps, bring her consolation . . . perhaps !

Against the curtains of her room was a beautiful *marqueterie* writing-table, at which her heart had poured itself out in long and passionate letters, and in loving little notes written when her lover had just left her ! She sat down at the accustomed place. Her pen ran on, tracing letters on the paper, but this time it was to say good-bye. . . . She scribbled the words with a shaking hand, the last words of a suicide. She folded the paper

and placed it in a conspicuous place, that the chambermaid would not fail to see it and deliver it at its destination.

The movements in the palace, which was just waking up, hastened Louise's resolution. She must be far away before anyone could stop her. The ample cloak which used to cover her in the autumn during her walks in the forest of Fontainebleau was hanging on a peg. She took it, and, shivering with cold and fear, covered herself with it. None could see her blue satin dress, and her curls disappeared under the hood. She crossed the labyrinth of stairs, halls, and passages that were familiar to her. It was bitterly cold, and the grey February morning seemed gloomy and threatening to the delicate hot-house flower, for the first time exposed to the dangers of the road.

She walked along the banks of the Seine. The waters were rough, and their deep and rapid flow whispered evil advice. It would be so easy and so quick, and after that nothing, nothing more, no more torturing anguish. But despite the sin that had separated her from her God, Louise still believed. Suicide, she knew, was a crime that did not receive absolution. Resisting temptation, she pulled herself together and went on towards her destination. The way was long, and her little feet were not used to the pebbles; but her instinct guided her. She was going to the

village of Chaillot, where there were several convents. Without stopping, she passed La Visitation, where she had accompanied her friend, Mlle. de la Motte-Argencourt, when she had been exiled by the Queen-Mother.

A little further on there was a door with a stone cross over it. It was in that obscure retreat, where no one could know of her existence, that she proposed to stay. Without hesitation she rang the bell.

A lay-sister was sitting in the porter's box looking like a mummy swathed in linen bandages. Her astonished eyes stared at the early visitor, who looked so upset and wore diamonds in her ear. "What can I do for you?" she asked as she got up. Trembling from her rapid walk, Louise answered: "I want to be a nun."

Never since she had been doorkeeper had the old sister seen a candidate in such a hurry. After having admitted her, she went to announce her presence to the Mother-Superior, and Louise examined the room into which she had been shown. The walls were bare. The parquet floor shone like a pond and reflected a row of chairs. A pale light came from above through an unglazed window. The whole atmosphere was icy and gripped the heart. But that which first caught the eye of the fugitive was the wooden framework which stretched from one end of the parlour to the other, cutting it in half, and making two

distinct countries entirely foreign to each other, two countries as different as if oceans flowed between them. On one side was the world, with its tumult, its noise, its amusements, and its pain, its plague of love and hate, its fight to achieve desires. On the other side the field of silence, the shelter of souls who have chosen the thing that really matters, and anticipated the peace of death. The young girl shivered as she thought that henceforth this was where she was to live.

Suddenly a door opened ; the rattle of a rosary was heard. A black shadow came forward—black from head to foot ; then a veil was raised and disclosed a face of wax. A voice that seemed to come from very far away asked the visitor what she wanted. Louise went close to her. Her forehead touched the wood of the enclosure, and she expressed her wish in all sincerity. "To enter here." The Mother-Superior was distrustful of her anguished glance and the tears that fell from her eyes. She felt herself faced with some great upheaval rather than a vocation. Her long experience warned her. The sorrow that expressed itself with such passion was altogether profane ; a love drama was at the bottom of it. How many of those victims she had seen coming thus to seek shelter ! . . . She found this one, it is true, very appealing with her hair like a child's, and looking like a wounded bird ! Probably her

fiancé had broken his vows to her. But before granting her wish she must know more.

" What trouble brings you here, my daughter ? "

Louise was at first at a loss for words, and blushed deeply. How could she confess to this holy woman, who already called her daughter ? It was impossible ! She was too ashamed. She dared not say the words within those austere walls, and deep sighs made the lace of her bodice rise and fall.

The iron gate, however, which separated the nun from the sinner, resembled a confessional, and Louise felt a little reassured. She fell on her knees, and her face hidden in her hands, she confessed all, all. . . . " Yes, it was true she loved a man whom she could not marry. It was a very serious matter, she knew, and in her conscience she bitterly lamented it. But what was she to do ? Her love held her so strongly that she had not had the courage to fight against it. Had she not thrown her honour, her reputation, her future, and the hereafter, like logs of wood into the fire ? And now he whom she loved had left her ! . . . He had gone ! And never wanted to see her again ! " . . .

The nun remained impassive. She only realized the scandal. With what passion the woman spoke of her sin, declaring that it was at the will of another that she renounced it. . . . Not a word of repentance—not a word of regret or of

fixed purpose! Nothing of what is demanded before forgiveness is given to a sinner. It was not possible to become the bride of Christ with such sentiments. She was aspiring to an honour of which she was not worthy. It was useless to profess a penitence she did not really feel. And with the authority of paramount power the Superior refused to receive her.

"Why? Why?" implored Louise.

"Your anguish is not holy."

"What must I do to make it so?"

"Go on suffering, suffer much more!"

The lover raised her frightened eyes to heaven. How could she add to her martyrdom? Was it possible to suffer more than she was enduring that day?

But the nun had also in the past drunk the wine of deception, and had only sought the convent when she was worn out with desolation. She was almost irritated to think that Louise, at her age, should imagine the bitter draught had been drunk to the dregs. She raised her two black sleeves, like sinister wings, and predicted much more pain and bitterer anguish!

Left alone, the poor weak creature burst into sobs. It was all too much for her—the prophecies, the refusal, the iron gates against which she had knocked in vain! Her strength had been taxed to its utmost, and she fainted.

. . . . .

LOUIS XIV

It was thus, two hours later, that the King found Louise, the King himself! He had left his mistress without a kind word and he had allowed her to sorrow alone all night. During the morning he had calmly attended to his daily occupations and had received the Spanish ambassadors, but it must be remembered that the heart of a great king is not made of the same tender stuff as that of a young girl, and it must not be imagined from all this that, at the time, Louis' love was not sincere. The emotion that he showed when he learnt that she had left the Tuileries proved how much he loved her. Where could she have gone? The gates of a convent must not be allowed to close on this treasure of his soul. His order to bring back the fugitive did not seem sufficient; and he decided to follow and bring her back himself. He ordered his horse to be saddled as quickly as possible, covered himself in a big cloak, and rode at full gallop along the road to Chaillot.

In that half-conscious state, which precedes the return to life, Louise heard someone talking to her. She began to regain consciousness and asked feebly: "Ah! why did I not die?"

But she heard the voice again. Somebody took her hands in his. She began to think she was dreaming. She raised her eyelids. And then, oh! wonder! a light shone in the profound darkness! . . . It was he, the lover from whom she had thought herself parted for the rest of her

days! He was there! He was looking at her! He helped her to rise. Louise could not believe in her happiness! "You!" she exclaimed, with a sigh that lighted up her pale lips.

Louis told her how his heart had almost ceased to beat when he had heard the news. . . .

"Why had she left him?"

"I thought you did not love me any more!"

He protested with all his soul! They were alone in the parlour. He had ordered that they should be alone. Words of love sounded strange within those walls used to the whispers of holy women. He protested that he had not ceased to love her. It was his rage that had made him forget the solemn promise they had made to each other, always to make up their quarrels at once. But at the same time . . . and he returned to the subject of their quarrel; and worn out, Louise ended by telling the things about which she had sworn to be silent.

Doubt, however, had entered into her soul. What she had thought immovable now appeared so fragile! The terrible decree of the nun still rang in her ears: "Go on suffering still, suffer much more! Only by long years of suffering can you hope to gain holy shelter." Louise was frightened. She wondered if it would not be wiser to remain? At that moment, as if the answer came to her from the cloister, a bell began to ring. It seemed to say to her that it was here

that she would find peace from the suffering that she feared, that here, little by little, her heart would find forgetfulness and resignation. . . . Alas, she could not hear the pure white voice, the heavenly voice of the convent chapel. It was calling to her ten years too soon. It was singing the last psalm to a heart where human love reigned and passion held its sway. Louise had lost the faith of her first illusions and clouds had gathered on her horizon. She knew that Calvary awaited her at the topmost heights of the mountain. She saw before her tears, heart-aches, jealousy, vain hopes . . . and in spite of all, she went on. A woman does not love only to be happy. To love is its own happiness. It is the supreme and infinite end of all. What power can extinguish a star ?

An hour later the little village of Chaillot was in a state of excitement. A coach with the royal arms had stopped outside the door of the convent. A captain had alighted. He had come to fetch Mlle. de La Vallière and take her back to the Tuileries.

A difficulty had arisen as to how Louise would be received. Since the morning her escapade had made a great sensation. Thinking she was utterly in disgrace, the courtiers joked and sang songs about her, and prudes professed themselves shocked at the scandal. But as soon as it was known that the King had gone to fetch her back

the tone had changed suddenly. The nobody now was decidedly someone to reckon with.

Monsieur, however, declared that he would oppose her return to Madame's household.

The King had not a great opinion of his brother and attached no importance to his wishes. But, for once, Monsieur and his household were of one mind. Henrietta's feelings towards her lady-in-waiting were no more indulgent than those of her husband. Indeed, it is probable that his attitude in the matter had been inspired by hers, but it was with her that the King decided to deal. Besides, they had an account to settle together. He thought he would play his strongest card by reproaching her with what he had heard about her, believing that after that she would not dare to throw stones at others! He was counting without his host. Although the Princess might have been frivolous, changeable, and light, she was proud and determined. Far from allowing herself to be intimidated, she held her own with Louis XIV. Neither he nor anybody else could force her to act against her will.

The King had to think of some other way. There was one means by which the King always managed to gain his point—by tears. He had the power, strange in a man with a strong character, of making the tears come to his eyes whenever he thought it might be useful to further his ends. In nearly all his quarrels with his

mother and with Maria-Teresa he wept copiously, and in a quarter of an hour he had forgotten all about it. He had been moved to tears by his sweet mistress, and it was by tears that he had persuaded her to leave the cloister? He would try the same device with Madame? She was not bad-hearted. She was generally sympathetic with the sufferings of lovers, and it was not probable that she would refuse a request made with a tear-stained face. In fact, Henrietta allowed herself to be persuaded. What she had refused to the sovereign she granted to the disconsolate lover, and La Vallière was reinstated in the little attic.

It might have been expected that she would have been happy and have enjoyed her triumph to the full, but the contrary was the fact. The shock had been too hard. Her delicate nerves remained on edge. Like a plant blown by the storm, she began to droop and fade. "Her mind seemed to wander," relates Mme. de La Fayette, "through fear of losing the love of the King."

Added to this, ecclesiastical wrath was heard thundering for the first time in the Chapel of the Louvre. It was high time to protest against the immorality that was becoming general, the example being set by the highest. Bossuet undertook the task of reformation. To this day one marvels at the courage with which this great churchman dared to denounce a scandal that as

yet had not become common property. Even the presence of the sovereign, whom all feared and flattered, did not deter him. In his severe, calm voice, he said what his conscience urged him to say. With extraordinary independence of spirit he uttered the following bold words in a sermon on pleasure: "Nothing takes our hearts further from God than that which attaches them to sensuous joys. Other passions carry us away for a while, but this takes possession of us and holds us altogether. God is no longer in your heart, sensual man. The idol that you worship is your god. . . ." Then, as if this collective reproach was not sufficient, he addressed himself directly to him who deserved it above all others. He even named him: "King, listen to Jesus, and learn from that King of Glory that all your heart should be given in loving Him and in making Him love you." Then turning to the congregation, among whom the King's accomplice was hiding, confused and trembling, he continued: "Oh! idolatrous, shameless creature, cast yourself out of this heart! Shadows and phantoms disperse in the presence of truth. True love waits to enter the King's heart. False and deceptive love, would you dare to keep it out!"

To hear herself pointed out publicly in the house of God was a terrible ordeal for a profoundly Christian soul like La Vallière! She thought

herself lost, damned, and delivered for ever into the hands of the devil. Hell seemed to her an abyss opening under her feet. For days she trembled and hesitated. She tried to regain her strength of will, and to escape from the lust of sin. . . . Then suddenly she renounced these thoughts of virtue, dear as they were to her, and to her eternal soul, and returned to that which was stronger than herself. "What does my damnation matter," she said, "so long as I love him whom I cannot prevent myself from loving!" Louise did not care what became of her personally. She only thought of the man she loved. She asked herself incessantly if he loved her, or whether the bishop's words had influenced him to put her from his heart, and at this thought she again saw the gates of the convent opening for her, and she was terrified.

She need not have feared! Although her lover was always mindful of the rights of the Church, and although he allowed the man of God to preach to him, the time was still far off when he would really hear the priestly voice. It required many more attacks than one sermon to make Louis renounce a sin so strongly rooted in his heart. Years would pass, and the fire of his senses would be quenched and re-lighted many times before they would die out altogether. Sorrows and reverses and the warnings of old age would first be experienced. Then a woman would

come to him dressed all in black like a nun, with firm white hands. Secretly, at midnight, she would lead him to the altar, and then subdued, well-balanced, and at peace with his conscience, she would keep him to the end, with the authority of God, with whom she would make a compact.

CHAPTER V

CLOUDS AND SUNSHINE

As soon as spring came, Louis XIV decided to visit the newly pruned elm trees at Versailles. Versailles, in those days, had none of the majestic splendour that is its to-day. It was a pretty château of brick and stone, with large windows, a flat slate roof, a few *salons*, and many rooms, like a house that a rich landed proprietor might have had built for his family. Louis XIII had built on an open field, not far from a swamp, and intended it only as a place to spend the night in when his hunting-parties took him too far into the forest of Saint-Leger. Although it was anything but regal, the house was large and comfortable in comparison with the wretched roadside inns that had often served to shelter him.

Louis XIV did not like Paris. It always reminded him of the Fronde, and he still bore a grudge to those streets from which he had been forced to fly during the riots. His desire was to live where he would be far from the people and the turbulent lords. He did not lack residences.

There was Saint-Germain, which was magnificiently situated and which had been built on to the old Donjon des Capetiens. There was Fontainebleau, decked with charming souvenirs of the Valois, which was at his royal disposal. But that which already existed could never please a monarch who wanted to eclipse everything that had gone before him. His natural taste for grandeur, already excited by all that he had seen at Vaux in the house of a mere subject, demanded something different, something better than had been created by his ancestors. He dreamt of a huge building where his entire Court could live at his expense. The vast plain of Versailles seemed to him the ideal situation for his plans. At Versailles he had full scope for creating everything from nothing; something that should bear the stamp of his name and his reign. Le Vau, the architect, at the same time had the good taste to preserve the greater part of the earlier building, putting a framework of marble round the courtyard and re-making, embellishing, gilding, and loading it with trophies and balustrades, so that in the end it was unrecognizable. . . . Two wings were added, and Mansart, the second architect, built the wondrous façade which seems to us now the majestic tomb of the dead monarchy. At the same time, the art of Le Notre covered the grounds with square flower-beds and thickets, and terraces and green pathways, the lines of

which followed those of the architecture, and which speak to this day of the spirit of the period.

The King invited his mistress to see the birth of these marvels. Under their interested and delighted eyes the buildings began to rise up out of the earth. The workers achieved the great transformation. Where once there had been green fields now rose a forest of oaks; that which was a dirty puddle became a tiny lake or a canal; marble filled the paths; charming mythological figures reclined on the borders of the fountains.

The joy of the young lovers can be imagined, in this fairy world, in this Eden specially created for them. The country was beginning to wear its dress of tender April leaves; the violets grew in profusion; the pink heads of the chestnut trees had started to place a bouquet on each branch; the scent of the lilac hovered under the archways. Everything smiled on them, everything sang to them. Nature appeared a kindly friend who received them with open arms, a friend who to welcome them had donned her newest dress. They were free to do exactly what they would, and none can better appreciate such freedom than those who have escaped from the fetters of a Court. Their souls, their minds, and even their limbs rejoiced in the deliverance. Their love was like a beautiful bird escaped from its cage.

They were no longer surrounded by flattery, or blame, or insistent freezing curiosity.

Often during these days, that sped as rapidly as thought, Louise repeated to her soul the wish that a year before she had expressed to a friend : " If only he whom I love were not of such exalted rank." And she tried to imagine what life would be if Louis were to remain always what he was at that moment : a rich and powerful châtelain, the organizer of beautiful things, the friend of animals and flowers. Hopes that are scarcely born fade away so quickly. Before the end of the week Louis XIV, who even in his most loving moments never forgot his duty as a king, ordered the return to Paris.

In his absence plots had been brewing, not exactly against him—no one dared plot against the King—but hatred was stirring itself against her whom he loved. Good and sweet and reserved as she was, the enmity she inspired became more and more vicious. Her best qualities excited her enemies. The reserve which to her friends was one of most appealing charms prejudiced her in the eyes of those who did not know her well. They did not think she had either the manner or the rare beauty which was required of a royal mistress, who should be the point of attraction for all eyes. Failing brilliant gifts, they wanted her at least to exercise a useful influence over the King. The courtiers desired for the King's

friend a woman who was clever and tractable, who, while she made her own fortune, would aid the ambition of others. There was nothing to expect from La Vallière. She inspired neither fear nor hope. A woman who refused everything, and only asked to remain in the background, was not likely ever to be popular. There was no use in supporting her, and her fall was resolved upon. Several influential ladies were thinking out a plan, and they had as collaborator that merciless destroyer of all that is young and beautiful, and would be eternal—Time.

At the head of Louise's enemies were Henrietta of England and her evil spirit, Mme. de Soissons. The failure of their first attempt did not discourage them. They made an elaborate new plan to warn the Queen. Once the Queen was informed, she would not fail, they thought, to be a powerful ally against this girl who had stolen the King's heart away from her. It was even possible that she might send her away from Court. The difficulty was to act in such a way as not to compromise themselves.

We know what a wall of illusions had been built round Maria-Teresa. All those who surrounded her vied with each other in keeping her from the truth. Everyone who might have enlightened her and have aroused the slightest suspicion in her mind was rigorously banished. The devotion of the faithful Molina, her "camarera major,"

who had accompanied her from Spain, kept watch over her. But in spite of all precautions, the Queen was suspicious, as all women are who love and who know that their love is not returned. The King's indifference, his slowness in showing her the affection she longed for, made her anxious. She tried to find out, she questioned her people, but her mind was not at all keen and she was always on the wrong track. She was still jealous of her sister-in-law Henrietta, while the latter was only thinking of La Vallière and of vengeance on her for supplanting her.

Anne of Austria was more anxious than anyone to guard the secret. She took every precaution and resorted to every kind of subterfuge to assure her daughter-in-law of the King's fidelity. The white lies on this subject did not interfere with her religious conscience : " Louis loves you," she assured her, " and no other woman could dethrone you in his heart."

The two accomplices had decided to insinuate themselves into a circle that was very carefully guarded. An anonymous letter seemed the easiest way and the one least calculated to throw suspicion on them. Naturally, no one could have imagined that great ladies like themselves, princesses so nearly related to the throne, would engage in an adventure only worthy of a pack of servants. Together these women, enraged with jealousy, composed a long statement in which they blackened

La Vallière's character in an abominable fashion, accusing her of being an intriguing creature trying to deceive the King.

It only remained to find someone to translate this villainous letter into Spanish. It seems almost incredible, but it was Guiche, the most elegant, the most refined lord in the kingdom, Guiche, the perfect nobleman, the cream of courtiers, who undertook the task. Madame had ordered it and he could not do otherwise than obey. Vardés, who did not wish to appear wanting in his devotion to his mistress, promised Mme. de Soissons to slip the letter among those that arrived every week from Spain and were delivered direct to the Queen.

Happily, La Molina was a good watch-dog. The unusual thickness of the envelope and the mysterious manner in which it had arrived aroused her suspicions. Fearing some pitfall, she took the responsibility of opening it. It was well she did. There was quite enough in the letter to make the Queen faint. She went straight to the King himself to inform him of her discovery.

It is easy to imagine the rage of Louis XIV. To think that after having established absolute power over his subjects, and believing himself the master whose will no one dared to resist, there should be anyone impertinent enough to betray his secret! . . . Enquiries were ordered

and the affair was thoroughly sifted, but all in vain. The guilty remained silent. For the first time, perhaps, the Great Autocrat realized that all things were not possible to him. It was not until three years later that, through a series of mutual recriminations, the truth came to light. The resentment that had been smouldering under the ashes was still warm enough for vengeance. The King had sworn to punish the wretches. . . . But here again, destiny marked the limit of his power. He could do nothing against his sister-in-law, more especially as at that time she was acting as his political agent with England. He had to temporize also with Guiche, out of regard for his father, the Duc de Grammont. The Comtesse de Soissons had the advantage of once having been Olympe Mancini. And it was Vardés who paid for them all. On his return to his Government at Aigues-Mortes, he was arrested by the royal archers. This meant prison, disgrace, and exile for the rest of his days. He escaped, however, but only after twenty years, and then on account of a joke at which Louis XIV deigned to laugh. This beggar of royal favour asked the King's pardon in the old-fashioned clothes which he had worn on the day of his arrest, as much as to say: "I have not lived since then."

The shot that was to lay La Vallière low had missed fire again, and the continued attacks against her only seemed to increase her favour

ATHÉNAÏS DE MONTESPAN

with the King and to make her more precious to him. The passion that she inspired in him by her appealing weakness was heightened and invigorated. The only reason that he did not give her official recognition was because with her extraordinary shyness she hid herself from anything that would make her conspicuous. She was not one of those who use love as a stepping-stone. Apart from her jewels and the dresses suitable for her eighteen years, she refused everything, and took a pride in remaining poor.

But though Louise was generous and disinterested, her brother undertook to exploit the royal munificence in her stead. There is a romantic anecdote attached to the début of this young man. It was on the occasion of a great review. The cadet corps was marching past the royal box. A handsome, well-set-up young lieutenant passed by, and La Vallière smiled at him. As soon as the lovers were alone, a jealous scene took place. Louis wanted to know who this young man was.

"My brother, Sire."

How was this? Louise had a brother and had never mentioned the fact to him? Why?

She had not wished to be indiscreet. She would not for the world appear to be soliciting favours for her family.

Kings are not used to such discretion. Once again Louis was astounded; his heart was charmed,

and since his mistress persisted in refusing everything for herself, her brother should have a double share. It was thus that Jean-François de la Baume le Blanc was gazetted cornet in the Dauphin's Light Horse with a pension of fifty thousand crowns.

An event had just taken place which had completed the happiness of Louise, and added to her peace of mind, a blessing which had so far been unknown to her. She could not possibly be happy while the most dangerous and seductive creature of the time displayed her incomparable grace beside hers, and said witty things to amuse the King. It would be untrue to say that, at that time, Athénaïs de Tonnay-Charente had any intention of replacing La Vallière as favourite, a position for which the latter was so unsuited and which seemed made for her. All the same, it was a load off the mind of Louise to know that Henry de Gondrin de Pardaillan, Marquis de Montespan, said by contemporaries to be "a man of wit and courage," had gained the hand of Mlle. de Tonnay-Charente. It created not a little astonishment that a daughter of the Mortemarts should be contented with an almost obscure nobleman, especially when it became known that she was to start married life with a very small income. This fact, however, did not prevent the marriage from being celebrated with great pomp, and sung by the inexhaustible muse of Loret,

who somehow or another contrived to make his praises rhyme with their names :—

Mardi, l'heureux marquis d'Antin,
Cheri du ciel et du destin,
Sans que personne fît obstacle,
Epousa ce charmant miracle,
Ce divin paradis des yeux,
Ce rare chef-d'œuvre des dieux,
Cette demoiselle excellente
Mortemart de Tonnay Charente
Qu'on ne saurait voir sans amour.

The young bridegroom was violently in love. He took his wife to his picturesque castle built on a rock in the Pyrenees, and for a long time she was not seen again. Louise was alone with her happiness. She had nothing to fear from rivals, and the days passed delightfully while she awaited the hour when the door of her little room would open and her beloved would appear.

It was at the very heart of this safety, this paradise of confidence, that Henrietta and the Comtesse de Soissons aimed their attacks.

It was well known that the King was always gallant and sensible to feminine attractions. However in love he might be, they did not think he could resist the advances of a pretty girl who would pretend to love him. The great thing was to discover one pretty enough to tempt him and clever enough to lead him on. Olympe's choice fell on Anne-Marie de la Motte-Houdancourt, lady-in-waiting to the Queen, whose unsatisfied

ambition looked forward to a higher destiny. The title of favourite that they held out to her was not calculated to frighten a young woman who, it was said, had set herself to rival La Menneville and had beaten her. Anne-Marie had all the powers of seduction which at first sight provoke desire, and too fine a wit not to know how to take advantage of them. Besides, Olympe undertook to add to the impression by telling the King that he had become the object of an irresistible passion.

No man was more delighted by admiration than Louis. The confidences of Mme. de Soissons had immediate results. He set out openly to make love to the young girl.

A difficulty, however, presented itself that had not been anticipated. Madame allowed her ladies-in-waiting to follow her example and to enjoy absolute freedom, but the Queen's ladies, on the contrary, were very strictly looked after. It was impossible to be on the same terms of familiarity with them, as in the days when a young lady had slipped a frog into the sleeves of the young Louis. The Duchesse de Noailles had changed all that. This virtuous woman, austere as well as cautious, personally watched over the household entrusted to her charge. Perhaps, also, mixed with real virtue was a desire to protest against the dissoluteness of the Comtesse de Soissons, who shared the post of

superintendent with her, and to emphasize the contrast between them. Their quarrels for precedence had embittered their relations. Made a favourite in the time when her uncle ruled everything, the Mazarin had been obliged after his death to give up to her rival the privilege of presenting the serviette to the Queen. A little while after, they disagreed about a pin-cushion, then about a seat in the coach, things which appear puerile to us now that the monarchial traditions have disappeared, but about which the whole Court took sides and which nearly led to a duel. Henrietta had supported the claims of Olympe, the Queen-Mother had sided with Mme. de Noailles. The two women hated each other. As soon as the latter thought she noticed that the King was assiduous in his attentions to a protégée of the Comtesse she became on her guard. That the King should take one of Madame's girls was bad enough, but that he should dishonour the household of the Queen was a scandal which no honest lady could countenance. And so without stopping to consider whether she would give displeasure or not, Mme. de Noailles sent Mlle. de la Motte-Houdancourt, on her own responsibility, into a retreat at Saint-Germain.

After a momentary annoyance the King appeared to be quite resigned. He always appreciated a good servant and he could not blame the Duchesse for taking her responsibility seriously.

But with fiery, ungovernable temperaments like his, accustomed to have everything give way to them, obstacles only increased eagerness. The idea that this young girl was being kept away from him made her seem more desirable than before. Louis' wish to rejoin her was so keen that it did not admit of delay, and orders were at once given and the Court set out for Saint-Germain.

This château, where he was born and where he had spent much of his youth, was a great favourite with Louis XIV. At one time he had almost decided to make it his official residence ; but the desire to build up out of nothingness had made him incline towards Versailles. Nevertheless, he delighted in the charms of the beautiful residence which descended in terraces to the Seine, and the expansive and smiling view is admired to this day (although it is rather spoilt by the quantities of roofs that now cover the valley). Above all he delighted in the vast open forest abounding in game, which lent itself to luxurious hunting-parties. Louis installed himself at Saint-Germain fully decided to pursue his conquest. But as in Paris, the strict superintendent was watching. . . . She put the beauty under lock and key. This was too much. For once in his life the King forgot his dignity and behaved like a page. He was seen on the roof disappearing down the chimney, and finally, taking advantage

of a door that was insecure he burst open the lock. Such outrageous behaviour only resulted in Mme. de Noailles strengthening the defences. She blocked up the passages, padlocked the doors, and put gratings over the chimneys. But these precautions were in vain! The next day the path was clear again, and the King joked about it and suggested that perhaps it was the work of ghosts.

The struggle lasted for some days, and however ridiculous she may have made herself, it is impossible not to feel admiration for the persistent lady, who in accomplishing her duty was risking disgrace. The disgrace was to come, indeed, but later, and when the King was able to find a decent excuse.

Mlle. de la Motte-Houdancourt was far from being a fool. If she had been allowed to follow her own inspiration it is certain she would have known how to make the most of the King's desire for her, and then Louise, betrayed and replaced, would have taken herself to the convent ten years earlier than she did. An evil—or, perhaps, a good spirit—under the guise of Olympe de Soissons, interfered. Prompted only by her hatred, this woman, equally dangerous to her friends as to her enemies, forbade her protégée to grant any concessions before she had obtained a promise.

Primed with these instructions, the obedient

pupil, one day when Louis was more insistent than before, repeated the phrase she had been taught :

" Either La Vallière, or I."

He may have been unfaithful, frivolous, and capable of a thousand follies, but Louis XIV possessed in a high degree the qualities of a nobleman. He resented the laying down of conditions—and he declined to choose between the brunette and the blonde. In his moment of sadness he would have the gentle eyes of Louise and her adorable tenderness. The other, with her panting bosom and her fiery nostrils, promised him the more passionate pleasures. Still she defied him :

" Not before. . . ."

Perhaps the sensual attraction would have won the day in spite of all. But in her anxiety to supplant her rival the young girl was lost to all sense of prudence. With a gesture of rage she tore from her ears the diamond ear-rings that the King had just placed there, and said :

" Since you do not wish to choose between myself and La Vallière, I don't want you or your jewels."

Such violence exceeded the limit that she had intended. The King's feelings cooled down at once and, haughtily and coldly, he walked out of the room.

Lover's quarrels, everybody knows, do not last

long. Perhaps to-morrow Mlle. de la Motte-Houdancourt would have come to her senses and tried again. But there was no to-morrow for her.

Although a Court is of all places in the world most suited to the hatching of plots, it is also the place where it is most difficult to bring them to a head. So many threads have to be disentangled before the desired goal is reached. . . . Thus it happened that, either by accident or by the treachery of some informant, Anne of Austria laid hands on the correspondence that had passed between her son and Mlle. de la Motte-Houdancourt. She was greatly surprised that a new intrigue had occurred so quickly. A short while ago the King had vowed himself in love for life with La Vallière. At first his mother was quite delighted. Then she began to have her doubts. Since she had to resign herself to the fact that Louis must have a mistress, the little provincial was certainly the least objectionable. She loved the King sincerely. She always kept in the background. She never meddled in affairs of state. She was not strong-minded enough to gain any influence over him. But as for La Motte-Houdancourt, a designing woman . . . it would be impossible to guess her ambitions.

That was not all. When the letters had been handed over to her, the Queen-Mother had been told that though they had been written by the

hand of Anne-Marie it had been at the dictation of the Comtesse de Soissons. She, then, was the moving spirit of the whole business, and Anne hastened to find the King and tell him.

His pride, once roused, dominated Louis XIV. The idea that an attempt had been made to deceive him filled his soul with rage, which was none the less to be feared because it was suppressed. Abruptly he turned from her, who the night before had made him run about on the roof, and came back to find true love in the arms of La Vallière.

Contrary to what he had probably expected, she received him angrily. There were scenes and reproaches, and she refused to forgive him. It was not a serious matter for her lover, who, like all men, did not attach such importance to passing adventures ; but to a woman like Louise to think that the vows of the night before had been so soon forgotten was a dreadful disillusionment ! . . .

The King, however, was very penitent. He was sincerely unhappy. He sent messengers to try and coax her from her cruelty.

Saint-Aignan, called Duke Mercury, the most eloquent of them all, depicted his master's repentance with great emotion :

" His suffering shows that he loves you more than life itself. Since you sent him away, he has given up hunting ; he is wretched ; he looks yellow and ghastly."

To this, Louise replied sadly :

" His Majesty does not depend on me for his happiness."

When he was told these words, their irony completed the discomfiture of the lover. He decided to go himself and plead his cause. He arrived in tears and fell at the feet of his mistress, swearing that he loved her, that he had never loved her so much. . . . The sight of his repentance deeply moved Louise, but did not affect her decision not to forgive him. She begged the culprit to rise and to come and sit beside her. But he insisted that it was only at her feet that he would obtain her pardon. With his lips pressed to the hands of the dear one, Louis incessantly assured her that if she did not take pity on him he would surely die.

But Louise had heard these protestations and promises before. Deep down in her bruised heart she listened to the sound of old echoes. She remembered the warning of the nun : " Suffer ! Suffer ! Suffer much more ! " Her whole unhappy being trembled. She had a presentiment that if she forgave him it would be the re-beginning of her martyrdom. But the voice of love, in spite of all, was the stronger. When a woman loves as Louise loved, and the guilty lover implores forgiveness, it is impossible to resist. How could she remain unmoved before the tearful insistence of her beloved's eyes, under the pres-

sure of adoring lips which burnt the hollows of her hands ?

That day, at least, she had no cause to repent of her decision ! It is said that the King remained with her for five hours.

Nevertheless, the attacks upon Louise continued. If Madame sometimes forgot her hatred, the Comtesse de Soissons remained relentless. She had sworn that the Queen should be informed, and she only awaited a suitable occasion.

Maria-Teresa was extremely religious. She had retained the Spanish custom of frequently going into retreat at a convent. The Carmel, in the Rue de Bouloi, was presided over by a certain Mme. de Boury, who had been left a widow before the age of forty and had come there to shut herself up with a sorrow which could not be reconciled with the world. It was as much to this woman, with her zealous and distinguished mind, as to the foot of the altar that the Queen came for the moral support that her weakness demanded. During her visits to the Carmel, she made it a rule that she should be left in peace. She would neither see nor hear anything that could remind her of the worries of the Court. Nevertheless, it was here, in this shelter, in this inaccessible peace, protected by a triple enclosure of iron gates, high walls, and silence, that the blow was struck. Under pretext of warning the Queen of something that was threatening her safety, the vindictive

Comtesse, with many details, and dates, told her all that had with such care been successfully kept from her.

Maria-Teresa at first showed no signs of her knowledge. But a few days later, those who were surest that she knew nothing, were astonished to discover that she knew all. It was after the birth of Anne-Elizabeth, the little Princess, who like all her brothers and sisters merely flashed across the earth. The Queen was still in bed. According to the strange custom of the times, everybody had to cross her room to go to Madame's apartments. When La Vallière passed in front of the royal bed, the Queen bent towards her faithful Motteville and whispered in her ear :

" You see that girl with diamonds in her ears ; it is she whom the King loves."

Taken aback, the lady-in-waiting protested vehemently. " Surely the Queen is mistaken. The King loves only Her Majesty."

But the details that Maria-Teresa had been furnished with clearly showed that some traitress had told her the secret. What was to be done but to console her and preach resignation to her ?

" After all," Mme. de Motteville argued, " what does the infidelity of a husband amount to ? It is simply a question of habit ; a passing fancy ; in reality, the King loves Your Majesty."

Such light morality was not likely to convince the soul of one brought up under the shadow of

the Escurial. By his neglect the wife guessed the distance that separated her husband from her. She poured out the whole weight of her sorrow on the shoulder of her mother-in-law, who did not know what to say to console her child.

A few evenings after this, a ball was given by Madame. The King went to it, superb in his satins and velvets, and ablaze with precious stones. The Queen, who was still ill, kept her room; but she refused to go to bed. What was the good, she said, since she could not sleep. All the same, blaming herself for keeping her women any longer, she allowed herself to be undressed, dismissed them, and sat in an arm-chair beside the fire.

Hours passed, during which, seated by the big fire-place, Maria-Teresa was lost in thought. . . . "How handsome Louis looked to-night! And to think that he belonged to another!" The distant sound of the music was wafted to her from time to time. "My God, will that ball never end!" At last the folding doors were thrown open. Footmen advanced solemnly bearing torches. After them came the King in his gold-embroidered clothes. Surprised to find the Queen undressed, with red eyes and tumbled hair, he asked her what she was doing in that state. "I was waiting," she replied sadly.

Her gloomy looks and reproachful words made Louis very angry. He replied harshly that he

had often begged his wife not to wait up for him.

A tactful woman would not have insisted further; but from the weak-minded Infanta it was useless to expect anything clever. She only continued to complain, and to moan:

"They have told me the truth. Another woman has taken my place . . . La Vallière. . . ."

This name coming into the discussion further irritated the culprit. He had the audacity to pretend he did not understand.

The Queen had promised secrecy; but to think that she would keep her word would have been to reckon without the fear with which her husband inspired her. At his first command she gave away the name of the Comtesse.

"She is a wicked woman," the King said reprovingly, "and you ought not to have listened to her."

Nevertheless, that which had been said had been said, and the Queen did not doubt the truth of it. She gave vent to endless reproaches, half in French and half in the Spanish jargon that she never managed to shake off. The King showed increasing signs of impatience.

At last he walked to the door.

"If I let him go away," thought Maria-Teresa, "I am lost! He will remember it to-morrow, and the day after, and in the days to come!" Rushing after him she threw herself on the floor

and kissed his knees: "For pity's sake do not leave me like this!"

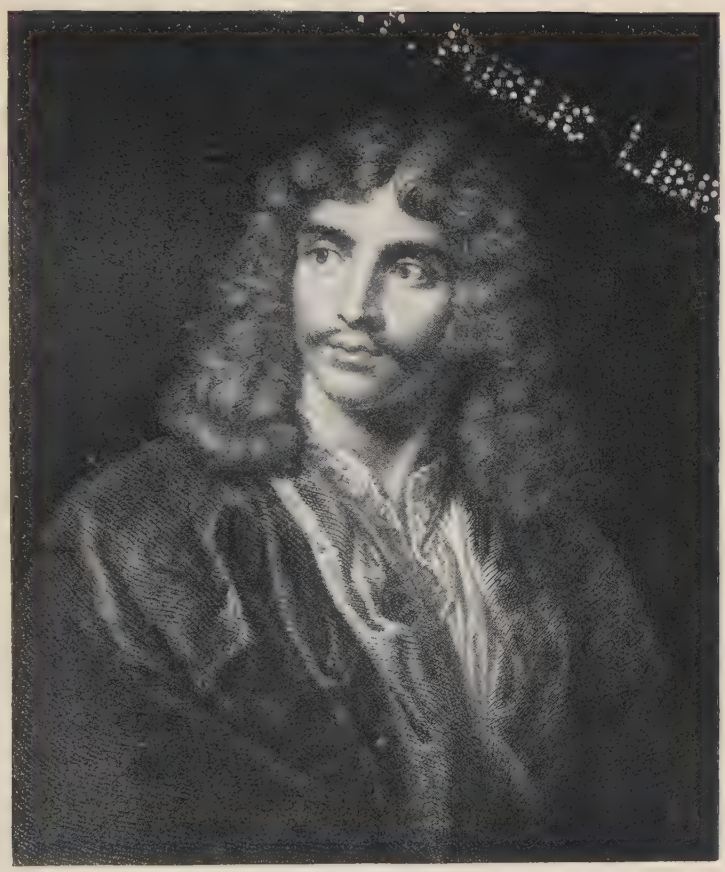
It has often been said that Louis XIV was hard-hearted. But it was not true, at any rate, of his attitude towards women. He loved them all—a little. He was no more indifferent to their pretty smiles than he was to their tears. Although his wife had never known how to appeal to his senses, he had a feeling of tenderness for her; the sort of affectionate pity that one feels for an inferior being, whose devotion is beyond all limits. Moved to pity, he bent towards the Queen and asked what he should do.

What was the use of talking? Maria-Teresa had just proved the inutility of words, and above all of reproaches. She decided, by a wise effort, to remain silent on the subject and only express her love for him.

"Whatever sufferings come to me through my Lord, I will always love him just the same."

This was worth all the reproaches. By such resignation and humble submission the unfaithful husband was softened. His conscience was touched to the point of remorse. He regretted his brutality. Gentle words came as easily to him as tears, and Maria-Teresa was delighted. "In the future," he promised, "you shall have no cause for sorrow."

This was vague, and did not in any way assure her that he would not deceive her any more.



MOLIÈRE

But the Queen was a child, and as soon as her tears were dried, she smiled again. She thought La Vallière was forgotten.

The unfaithful husband, who was only thinking of ensuring his liberty, arranged matters to suit himself.

"From the age of thirty," he promised, "I will be a faithful husband." Until then, he asked that there should be no more suspicion or reproaches.

Until the age of thirty! The Queen counted up on her little fingers! That made five more years! . . . Five more years during which her handsome Louis, whom she wanted to keep always by her side, would amuse himself and be fickle. What a long Calvary! However, there was nothing to do but to submit.

The King was not sorry, at heart, at what had happened. The situation was cleared up now and admitted, and that assured him peace. Without completely kicking over the traces (he only did that after his mother's death), his love would, in the future, be on a more independent footing.

But this did not prevent him from being furious with the person who had dared to bring trouble into the Queen's soul. He sent for her, fully resolved to be severe. Misfortune had it that instead of the true culprit an innocent person suffered. Olympe, who was always ready with a

lie, pretended that the Queen had already been informed by Mme. de Noailles. In reality, the latter had only been guilty of listening to the grievances of Maria-Teresa. But there was nothing to shield her against the lying statement. The King did not hesitate between the upright character of Mme. de Noailles and the she-devil, Olympe, whose brilliant glances he remembered had first fired his youth. The Duchesse and her husband were immediately ordered to leave the Court. And all the tears and prayers of the Queen-Mother could not save them from his anger. The moralists were doomed to end their lives in exile, and the post of superintendent was shared by the Italian and the cunning Mme. de Montausier, whose complaisance made things easy in the future.

At the same time as he was smoothing out domestic difficulties, the King's policy triumphed abroad. All Europe bowed down before his greatness. At Rome, as well as in Spain, the ambassadors of France obtained privileges which gave them the advantage over those of other nations. Madame's negotiations with England were at last coming to a head. France acquired Dunkirk for a ridiculous sum, a place which she had always coveted and which was given over with arms and ammunition, and wealth of all kinds.

France hardly knew how adequately to celebrate

these peaceful victories. Splendid fêtes were ordered and were paid for by Colbert's clever administration. The Louvre was the magnificent and pompous scene of these fêtes. To all appearances they were presided over by the two Queens. Anne of Austria from her box, draped in blue and hung with fringe of gold, presided over the tilting and passage of arms, and the famous quadrilles, called the "Carrousel des Nations," where, in wonderful costumes, the flower of the nobility whirled round and crossed and showed off their supreme elegance. Maria-Teresa decided who was the winner and awarded the prize to the victor. But in reality, La Vallière was the life and soul of the festivities. Whether wearing the Roman purple, the King wheeled about and saluted her with a whirl of his golden sword, or whether as the Bourbon King, in the brilliance of his manly beauty and wearing the star on his breast, which was in future to become his device, his thoughts were always with her.

The mania for fancy dress which took such a hold on the Court did not reach its height until the spring of 1664, during the celebrated week when *Les Plaisirs de l'Île Enchantée* took place at Versailles. Remembering Ariosto, the Duc de Saint-Aignan, the grandmaster of the royal amusements, had a brilliant idea. He imagined that the island of Alcine the Enchantress had

floated as far as France, and aided by an Italian engineer, who was well versed in all kinds of machinery, he organized a series of fêtes which resembled those that had bewitched the Chevalier Roger.

La Princesse d'Elide was played. It was not one of Molière's best plays. It could not have been, considering that he was ordered to write it twenty days before it was produced; but the allegories and interludes that it contained made it delightful. If Benserade had been the first to publicly applaud the merits of La Vallière, it is equally true to say that Molière, who was well informed as to what was likely to please the sovereign, was the apologist of the sentiment that she inspired. The allusions that he hazarded about the guilty couple were so obvious, and his manner of flattering so daring, that they appear astonishing in these days. One wonders how such liberties were possible in the presence of the two Queens. There is only one answer: everybody was obedient to the will of the sovereign, and the will of the sovereign was law. It was he and he alone that everyone strove to please. It was certainly not without his approval that Molière dared to represent him in the person of Euryale, a young prince in love, who in the first act complains to his confidant of "the weakness of a heart that suffers when it is subdued or tamed." The confidant, far from blaming this "tender

effusion," replies in a long tirade in which the virtues of a monarch in love are applauded :—

> Je dirai que l'amour sied bien à vos pareils,
> Que de tribut qu'on rend aux traits d'un beau visage
> De la beauté d'une âme est le clair temoignage
> Et qu'il est malaise que, sans être amoureux,
> Un jeune prince soit et grand, et généreux.
> C'est une qualité que j'aime en un monarque ;
> La Tendresse du cœur est une grande marque
> Que d'un prince, à votre age, on peut tout presumer
> Dès qu'on voit que son âme est capable d'aimer.

Although Louis XIV was surfeited with flattery it always pleased him. It gave him a proud joy, mixed, no doubt, with a little distrust, but still a joy. In the midst of these wonders, these songs, and these poems, which were dedicated to him, he felt himself the real master, the lucky and uncontested master. The woman he loved was as wax in his hands. He wished everybody to respect her—he insisted upon it. Wherever he went he demanded her presence, at his table as well as in the council chamber. Lotteries were got up, in which she won the biggest prizes, amongst other things a beautiful bracelet that Madame wanted. Although he had not as yet conferred an official title on Louise, every new favour that he showed her left no doubt as to the place she held in his heart. Every day in that magic week was the occasion for some new triumph for her, and when the royal favour was not showered on her it was her brother who gathered the golden rain.

A courtier by instinct, this young man had taken advantage of his sister's good fortune to build up his own. Ever since he had gained the rank of cornet he had managed somehow to be constantly before the King's eyes. His ready wit, his charming, easy manners and his marvellous aptitude for asking favours had rapidly obtained for him advancement, pensions, dress allowances, mess allowances, in fact, all that was necessary to cut a dash in society.

As in the present time, a grand marriage was in the seventeenth century the career intended for young lords whose principal business was to be charming. Fate procured a rich and noble heiress for the Marquis, who in addition was extremely pretty. Gabrielle Glé de Costardière was related to the most important families of Brittany. "Her fortune," a contemporary assures us, "was worthy of a prince." All the greatest personages in Paris signed the marriage contract, headed by "the most high, the most powerful, the most excellent Prince Louis, by the Grace of God, King of France and Navarre, and the most high, the most powerful, most illustrious Princess Maria-Teresa, etc." Even the little Dauphin, who was barely two years old, had his hand guided while he traced an L and a D.

But his ambition was not satisfied yet. "The waters are low," he wrote to Louvois one year after his marriage, and to bring them to their

level he begged for the property which had just been confiscated by the Bailiff of Chartres and two other condemned men.

Although the custom appears strange to us that anyone should desire to take the place of rogues that the law has dispossessed, in those days it was thought no disgrace. There was a struggle as to who would get the fortune which through confiscation had returned to the royal coffers, and they did not care by what means they attained their ends. In this instance the Marquis tried the effect of a protection, which, though it was not exercised directly, at any rate, heightened the credit of the asker. Not only did he obtain what he asked for, but a little while later more revenues and still more : two hundred thousand francs in our money of to-day.

It was more than enough to turn the head of a young man who, apart from this, was not very strong-minded. Popular and fêted, François de La Vallière thought he could do what he liked. The advantageous but, at the same time, false position which his sister placed him in should have made him more careful. But he lost sight of that. He was intoxicated with pride. On many occasions his presumptuous manner, the assurance with which he appropriated the best places, had caused him to be called to book. But the great difference between people of real merit and successful adventurers, is their want

of tact. This definitely showed itself when he took advantage of the secret bond that attached him to the King to appear at a masquerade as a Phœnix which is burnt by the sun, and carrying the striking device : " It is a joy to be burnt by such a sun." It was only Louis' great passion, a passion which accorded full licence to all those even distantly connected with Louise—her relations, friends, and her entourage—that prevented him from feeling, or, at any rate, from showing that he had noticed the indelicacy of this act.

Though she was modest and disinterested, the King's favour did not fail to delight Louise. She watched the cavalcades and retinue of attendants which were displayed in her honour. She listened as one in a dream to the music which she had inspired. Her soul was uplifted and rose to unknown heights. But the wonder of her destiny left her soul untouched. Above all, Louis was her lover. It was only at night, at the hour when the Court was silent, far from pomp and ceremony, that she felt completely happy. In spite of the wax torches there were still some dark corners in the thicket. There she used to meet her lover. Their lips met impetuously ; their hands found each other in the darkness. They walked along the flowery terraces in a tender embrace. The heavy scent of the orange blossom made them feel languid and overpowered. From

time to time they would stop and look at their reflection in the dark waters of the lake. They smiled at themselves in silence. How eloquent is the poem of words that are not spoken! Their emotion was so great that it made them feel faint. They would find a bench under the trees. A swarm of insects buzzed round them. It seemed to them that the very soul of the garden was pressed against their hearts.

Such happiness is short-lived. La Vallière was never permitted for long to forget that she was born to weep. Scarcely had the sensation of Alcine's Palace subsided before an uninterrupted series of misfortunes befell the Royal Family. The eldest daughter of their Majesties, Anne-Elizabeth of France, died after living five months. The King's grief was echoed in the sympathetic soul of his mistress. However great was the charm and gaiety of Louise in happy times, it was in the hour of sorrow that her genius for loving betrayed itself. Then she was all devotion and tenderness.

After the death of the baby, Anne of Austria fell ill, owing to the abominably unhealthy sanitation of the time which infested the Court with bad germs, or perhaps to her grief. Then it was Maria-Teresa. For days it was necessary to keep up the King's courage, and help him to bear his trials. Suddenly things reached the climax. He himself caught the measles, and his condition quickly became serious.

The confusion at Court was chaotic. The princesses were crying. The courtiers went about with anxious faces, and what can be said of the sufferings of the gentle mistress? There was a rumour that the royal life was in danger, and Louise was blinded with grief. She ceased to trouble about the modesty which usually dominated her actions, and only thought of being near her loved one. The insistence with which he asked for her presence showed clearly that at that time, at least, she was no less dear to him than he was to her. In his delirium her name was the only one that passed his lips. He called her, he wanted to see her. But power had passed into the hands of the doctors. By their orders the mistress was kept away. She was seen wandering up and down the passages like a soul in torment. For hours at a time she was glued to the door behind which her fate was being decided. On the ninth day the fever abated, and the danger had passed. It was now for the King to decide whether the door should be opened. Having recovered consciousness, he remembered that measles were contagious. No power in the world would persuade him to risk the life of his beloved, which was more precious to him than his own. Here is an example of unselfishness which it is only fair to record in favour of a man who has so often been said to have had a heart of stone.

His extraordinary vitality and energy prevented

him, in spite of himself, from being unhappy for long. His nature threw him into distractions with a vigour renewed from its long suppression. Forgetting the recently closed coffin of Anne-Elizabeth, he appeared as a rustic lover in the Ballet des Arts, which was danced at the Palais Royal, with La Vallière at his side. She looked delicious in her simple country gown with garlands of roses, her hood, and her wand. As usual her entrance was accompanied with appropriate verses :—

> Non, sans doute, il n'est pas de bergère plus belle ;
> Pour elle, cependant, qui s'ose declarer ?
> La presse n'est pas grande à soupirer pour elle
> Quoiqu'elle soit si propre à faire soupirer.
> Elle a dans ses beaux yeux une douce langueur
> Et, bien qu'en apparence, aucun n'en soit la cause,
> Pour peu qu'il fût permis de fouiller dans son cœur
> On ne laisserait pas d'y trouver quelque chose.
> Mais pourquoi, là-dessus, s'étendre d'avantage ?
> Suffit qu'on ne saurait en dire trop de bien,
> Et je ne pense pas que dans tout le village
> Il se rencontre un cœur mieux placé que le sien.

It was impossible to deny a fact which was admitted with such triumphal brilliance. Besides, Louis XIV no longer considered that he was under any further obligation to dissemble. He thought it unworthy of the King who laid down the law to the whole of Europe to worry his head about such things or to make any concessions. He had an imperious desire, publicly, to advertise

his mistress. Those who, in the future, wished to please him would have to please her and treat her with respect. At the same time, Louise, who had begun to feel the inconvenience of being a poor little nobody who was ground down under the heels of her enemies, began to hold up her head a little higher. Her innate pride was hurt at being put aside. Her loving heart longed for companions more worthy of her. It was sweet to her to be taken care of and to be surrounded with sympathy. But fate had ordained that she should pay dearly for all happiness.

Although the Queen-Mother had consented to shut her eyes at the beginning to her son's guilty attachment, her promise was given when the attachment was still obscure and unknown, or, at any rate, before it was flaunted in the face of the Court. She now felt that she could tolerate it no longer. The widow of the virtuous Louis XIII could not, without losing her dignity, shut her eyes to the ovations and the verses which were becoming a public scandal, nor could she forget the grief they were causing to Maria-Teresa. Since the revelations that had destroyed any doubts she may have had on the subject, she had never ceased to complain. It hurt her to think that ladies of the highest rank should forget the respect they owed to their Queen, and publicly side with "that girl." It was too much. Anne of Austria's anger fell on the first one that came

to hand, Mme. de Branças, who she had met the night before arm in arm with La Vallière. She reprimanded her so soundly that the lady hung her head. To all appearances, she submitted to her reproaches ; but the next instant she went to the King with her complaints.

" Is it fair, Sire, that I should be treated in this manner for obeying your orders ? " she asked.

Louis XIV was a respectful son. Perhaps this was the first time that he had raised his voice before his mother ; but love changes one strangely. Boiling with rage, he asked for an explanation. Anne of Austria lost her temper and reproached her son with his conduct. He, on the other hand, reminded her that she also had once been young, and that . . . What passed between them, shut up alone in the *salon* at Fontainebleau, adjoining the oratory where the old Queen had retired, no one ever heard. One imagines, however, that things reached a climax, for the King and his mother did not speak to each other for several days.

Since she had resigned her office of regent, Anne of Austria had been very popular. She was loved for her just mind and her upright character. The beautiful devotion which she had shown in regard to her children gained her the respect of everybody, and the services that on many occasions she had rendered to the State were rightly appreciated, and if there were many different

opinions about the motive of her quarrel with her son, everybody agreed in deploring it. It was feared that if it continued much longer, the Queen-Mother would carry out the project which she had often talked of, and would retire to the Val-de-Grâce and finish her days there in peace. Once she was gone and her moral influence no longer exercised, what would become of the Court? Who would there be to make peace in a thousand little disputes? Who would there be to preach wisdom? It was no use counting on Maria-Teresa, and Madame was too taken up with her pleasures and would only have added to the spirit of dissension. . . .

Monsieur was the first to feel this. In spite of his weakness, his vices, and the peculiarities which made him such a wretched creature, and of the fact that he was an execrable husband, he was always a devoted son. He paid charming attentions to his mother and surrounded her with the rather babyish affection of the younger son, who needs protection and support against the strength of the elder, and who realizes that once his mother has left him, he will never find again the unselfish kindness he found under the wing that sheltered his childhood.

Anne of Austria had a weakness for her dandified, handsome son, which gave her old age the illusion that she had a daughter. It was to him, for preference, that she carried her complaints,

and if ever she had some family trouble and it was a relief to talk to someone, she went to Monsieur for consolation.

"Do you see how the King treats me!" . . . she said one day when Louis had passed her without a word.

It would be untrue to say that Monsieur did not feel the malicious pleasure that the younger son feels when he finds his elder brother has put himself in the wrong. This time he overcame this feeling and only thought of his mother's grief. With touching sincerity he set himself to bring about a reconciliation.

The trouble was even more serious than it was thought at first, for his efforts were useless. Monsieur did his best to arrange chance meetings, to leave the King in his private room with their mother, but the latter used to come out of the room with red eyes without a word having been exchanged between them. In the meanwhile, Louis attended to his occupations, amused himself, worked, and loved, whilst his mother passed her time in solitary inactivity and was miserable. . . .

The end of it all was that Anne of Austria's health broke down. She refused to come to table. She found it impossible to eat, and her nights were restless. . . . In the morning her Spanish chambermaid used to find her in tears, kneeling on the steps of her private chapel, where she had

been praying for hours: "Ah! Molina!" she would exclaim in a voice broken with pain. "Estos hojos!" (These children!) And the simplicity of her complaint told of the suffering that her mother's heart had endured.

The Queen's pale face under her large widow's bonnet, her sighs, and her reproachful glances filled the King with remorse. His displeasure with himself, so unpleasant when a man's conscience is not quite dead, interfered with the pleasures of the lover. He longed to put an end to the quarrel. But the misfortune is that in these sort of affairs there is a senseless pride with which to reckon. Each one wished the matter ended, but the question arose as to which of them should ask forgiveness of the other. Instead of throwing themselves into each other's arms, they wrangled and made a duty of their pride.

Happily, Anne of Austria was religious, and she referred the matter to the decision of her confessor. The latter, thinking that the situation had already lasted too long, obtained a promise from his royal penitent that she would overcome her repugnance to humiliate herself before her son. At the same time, clever Father Tellier advised the King to make advances to the Queen, so that, urged by the impulse of their hearts, they met each other half-way without quite knowing which side had taken the first steps. Their meeting

Gravé par R. T. Cathelin, Graveur du Roi

PEINT PAR DUREUX, PEINTRE DE LEUR MAJESTÉS IMPÉRIALES

From the collection of A. M. Broadley

was very touching. Each acknowledged faults and begged pardon for the pain they had given the other. The regrets of the mother and the son mingled with tears of joy. They declared that they had never ceased to love one another, and that they had suffered at not being able to give each other proofs of their affection for so long.

But even in moments of great emotion, men and women do not lose their characteristics. As much from a feeling of duty as from a natural instinct, Anne of Austria again preached to him. Since the day he had reached his majority and she had placed the sceptre in his hands, the only part she had played was to preach virtue to him, ceaselessly and with great emphasis. It is true that the ungovernable will that the King had shown since his childhood justified her zeal. She had been obliged to use all her strength to save him from such a disastrous mistake as a marriage with Marie Mancini. And more recently, she was just in time to warn Louis against the seductive Henrietta and the designing Anne-Marie de la Motte-Houdancourt. To-day it was against La Vallière that the ex-regent vented her anger. Making use of the cut-and-dried words of the Church she spoke of Louise as an "object of miserable sin, a dangerous bondage, the stumbling-block against which, etc. . . ."

However altered the King's sentiments were

towards his mother, he still remained firm in all that concerned his mistress. It might even be said that she had become dearer to him since she had been furiously persecuted and had endured the persecutions, met with tact and without complaint.

After having listened with all due deference to Anne of Austria's remonstrances, and having kissed her beautiful hands with gentle courtesy, Louis declared in a tone of voice that did not brook any reply: "No doubt his soul was in peril, he knew it, and though he deplored the fact, there was no help for it. His passion was too strong for him."

"How unhappy you make me!" replied the Queen.

And then abandoning the ground which she saw was too strongly defended, she returned to the subject which had been the cause of the rift between her son and herself. She asked, at least, that ladies of quality should not be obliged to attend the favourite. But there again the King was not to be shaken. He said that he had too long overlooked the insults, the wickedness, and oppression to which La Vallière had been subjected, and that henceforth he had made up his mind that the woman he loved should have a position worthy of her and of his love for her.

From that moment the Queen understood that all further struggle would be vain. Besides, she

had aged considerably and had begun to feel the effects of the illness that was eventually to cause her death. Anne of Austria only desired to be at peace with God and to have the love of her children during the little time she had to live. These feelings made her lenient in the future. So much so, that one day at Vincennes when her sufferings had obliged her to keep her bed, she actually received La Vallière politely when the King brought her to visit her, and allowed her to be seated, thus setting an example for her rebellious daughter-in-law.

CHAPTER VI

MATERNITY

LOUIS had been forced to act as he did for a very serious reason. Louise was about to be a mother. Although he had not particularly wished this to happen, he accepted the fact with the regal pride which characterized all his actions. So far, although his love had desired it, he had been unable to give his favourite an independent position at Court, but when the time came, he knew how to obtain the respect due to the mother of the King's child. Meanwhile the secret was zealously guarded. Confused and upset, La Vallière had told no one. It seemed to her that she would rather die of shame than let her secret be known. . . . Indeed, it is easy to imagine the anguish and the humiliation of this still young girl, of good family, brought up as a pious Catholic, full of old-fashioned ideas and fearing the opinion of the world, when she felt the proof of her guilt palpitating in her. She blushed at the bare thought that her intrigue should be known, and now she was faced with an undeniable public exposure. To make things

worse, the King talked of going away. His army was in Lorraine and his place was at its head. He would not leave his soldiers to fight without him. Before leaving he intended at least to arrange affairs for his mistress, as she obviously could no longer remain in the service of Madame. It was high time that he assured her an independent position with a house and servants of her own . . . everything indeed that he should have given her long before.

An old courtier of the name of Brion was about to be married and had built a mansion for himself, but before he was able to occupy it he had died. The house was neither commodious nor comfortable, but its isolated situation in the gardens of the Palais Royal, on the side which is to-day the Rue Richelieu, made it possible to go in and come out without being seen. That was the important thing. The King bought the house, furnished it, and persuaded Louise to accept it. Then he went off to besiege Marsal.

Her life amid the beautiful furniture and the embroidered rose silk curtains was sad, indeed. Louise missed the little room in the Tuileries, where she, at least, could say to herself : " He is coming soon." " Here he is ! " In her new home the interminably long days began and ended in miserable loneliness. It is true that proofs of the King's love were not wanting. Every courier brought a mysterious envelope without name or

address on it, and this Colbert was ordered to deliver safely to her. She opened the letters with feverish hands. They made her believe that she was indeed loved; but her joy only lasted for a few hours and then she was left waiting in eager anxiety for the arrival of the next courier. Before her eyes always was the prospect of the event which nothing could prevent. While they are awaiting the birth of their baby, other women have a husband, relations, a mother, to help them to keep their courage. Louise had no one. She was alone with her remorse and her shame. A loose dark cloak enveloped her body, and to make doubly sure that no one should guess her secret she rigorously shut herself up in her rooms.

Colbert and his wife alone were received at the Hôtel Brion. The King had left Louise in their care. Colbert had a naturally hard face. Thick eyebrows, stern eyes, the sunken cheeks of an æsthete accented his apparent harshness. He was chosen, however, in preference to Roquelaure, Saint-Aignan, and La Feuillade, who were merely delightful and amusing companions. The King knew the solid worth of his minister. He knew he could rely on his discretion. His wife also was entirely to be trusted. She was quiet and skilful, and had already brought up seven children of her own. Between the two of them they played their part so well that before another

year had passed they were entrusted with a similar task, and in the future all the royal bastards were given into their care. When the time arrived, Colbert told two old and trusted servants to be ready to receive and bring up "the child of a lord and a young girl of good family." He took the midwife secretly to Louise's house, and when in the small hours of the morning of 18th December, 1663, everything was over, it was he who wrote to the King: "A healthy boy was born. The mother and child are well."

In spite of all these precautions, the truth was soon known. There were rumours concerning the reason of La Vallière's retirement. It was generally believed that she was nearing the time of her confinement, and Dr. Boucher's carriage at her door confirmed the Court's suspicions. It was even whispered that the King was actually with his mistress at the moment when her agony began and that he stayed with her until the evening, in spite of a repugnance for such events; a repugnance sufficient to prevent him, under similar circumstances, from being at the bedside of the Queen. All this gossip was reported to her by her chambermaids, and it tortured her. She was happy that the King had shown her such tenderness, but she yearned to know alone how good he had been. The knowledge that all the world knew her relations with Louis had always been an

almost unbearable reproach, and she would have given anything for the Court to have remained in ignorance of the consequences of her liaison. The idea that she would be stared at, and that the date of her return was being looked out for as a proof of what had happened, gave her the courage to make a heroic denial. Forcing herself by an effort that might have cost her her life, she got up on Christmas Day, the sixteenth day after the birth of her son, in a state of weakness when other women, even the poorest and most neglected, are not allowed to move, and she went to midnight mass at the Chapel des Quinze-Vingts. The whole Court was present. Louise's entry caused a great sensation. It was thought that she looked changed and ill. But she appeared so frail as she stood and knelt during the sacred service that envy and hate were stilled, and she was received with respectful silence. At all events, her courage was admirable.

Louise herself was not quite sure of what had happened. She might have just awakened from a nightmare rather than have lived through a drama. The child of which she was supposed to be the mother had vanished! It had been taken away from her room before she had scarcely had time to kiss it. And when she asked for her son, the only answer was: "The King's orders," orders which Louise never disputed. For her the voice of Louis was the voice of fate. Whether

he broke her heart or opened the gates of Paradise she meekly accepted. Her heart found a sort of satisfaction in being put to the test of torture. Martyrdom steeped her in a fearful joy. By a sort of mysterious blending of sensuality and spiritualism which placed her above the mere vulgar courtesan, she never was really happier than when love made her a gentle, vacillating creature, ground down by obedience.

After the birth of her son, who was registered under a false name, in a false family, and whom she never saw, Louis felt doubly tender towards his mistress. The necessity for concealment was now over. He announced that in future his mistress would be beside him near the throne, and that without any official post or duty to bring her there she would have her place at Court solely by the royal decree. Those who most opposed this step were obliged to accept it. It had to be. Both the Queens felt that resistance would be useless. Even arrogant Henrietta of England, whose ill-feeling was very far from extinguished, was obliged to receive her old lady-in-waiting politely. The King was glad to be able to make her feel that he was master and that, in spite of all, his will was law. He refused to be present at a fête which Madame gave at her residence at Villars-Cotterets unless La Vallière was invited, and Louise was delightfully blooming that evening, as women often are after a first

child. That her triumph might be complete the King gave her a dress in which the brocade and silver was drowned in lace; and a string of pearls which he placed round her neck accentuated its beautiful curves. But all the adornment and flattery left her humble and timorous. The brilliance of her fortune added to her anxiety. She would have preferred to love the King in secret. Her public position made her ashamed, but he gloried in it. He not only felt the lover's joy in seeing his mistress shine, he tasted the super-joy of having secured his own way. Victory amused him. He liked to bend everyone to his will. His love of ruling, of overcoming, of subjugating things and people, sometimes became sheer cruelty. He resolved to force the Queen to receive La Vallière.

Louise had a profound respect for her sovereign. It hurt her to make her suffer more than she already suffered at the neglect with which she was treated. Her heart was too sensitive not to realize the painful feelings of the woman who had thought she possessed her husband's affection for always and who now saw herself deprived of it. She was wretched at being the cause of the Queen's suffering, and she tried by every means in her power to spare her. On bended knee she implored the King to give up the idea of forcing her on his wife. But Louis XIV could not be moved from his purpose. "No, his mother had

not resisted his will, and he would make his wife submit also."

Mme. de Montausier was given the task of arranging the interview. It was a very ungrateful mission, and whoever undertook it ran the risk of fatally displeasing Maria-Teresa. The new superintendent had replaced the Duchesse de Noailles on condition that she was ready to be obliging on any and all occasions, and she was forced to obey. With many precautions she approached the Queen and told her what the King commanded.

There are some cases when no amount of beating about the bush can soften the blow that is being struck. No sooner had she heard what was expected of her, than the Queen was in a fury of indignation. Her warm Spanish blood boiled in her veins.

"Never," she exclaimed. "I will never submit."

The ambassadress insisted. Although the anger of the Queen was to be feared, the anger of the King was much more fearful. She tried to make the Queen realize the certain consequence of this anger, and advised her not to expose herself to it.

"The sacrifice is not so great that Your Majesty cannot make up your mind to it."

"What," interrupted Maria-Teresa angrily, "are you trying to advise me to allow this girl to enter my apartment?"

Mme. de Montausier had a conciliatory manner. It might even have been the excess of this trait which had developed that celebrated misanthropy in her husband which served as a model to Molière for his picture of Alceste. She continued to talk.

"By receiving Mlle. de La Vallière, Your Majesty would only be following the example set by the Queen-Mother and many other illustrious ladies who could not prevent their husbands from loving elsewhere, and who did not wish to dissuade their husbands from coming to see them by refusing to receive the object of their affections."

However, it was entirely useless to try and reason with a woman filled with jealousy! The Queen shouted and stamped her feet. At no price would she submit.

The King, who was listening outside the door, burst in suddenly with La Vallière following him, or rather dragging behind him, for as far as lay in her power she had never ceased to resist. In the presence of the Queen she hung her head. Her cheeks were scarlet and her hands trembled. She bowed so low that she almost fell. Although Maria-Teresa was stubborn, meaningless, and devoid of charm, she was kind-hearted, and at the sight of the woman who, she imagined, would behave with haughty insolence, thus crushed and humbled, she accepted the inevitable.

The scene, however, was too much for the poor lady, who had till then constantly been shut away from the realities of life, and the consequences were the more unfortunate as Maria-Teresa was enceinte. Her nose began to bleed, and a few days later she gave birth to a still-born child.

It is easy to imagine the desolation and remorse of Louise. However small had been her responsibility, she still had reason for reproaching herself. But for her sin and the grief it had caused the Queen, all this would never have happened. To add to the disaster the royal child was born a kind of monster. Superstition, which is so often mixed with religious beliefs, laid hold of this event. Louise's enemies declared that it was a warning from God.

While she was still ill, Maria-Teresa took advantage of a moment of consciousness to try and ring a promise from the King that, should she recover, he would give up La Vallière and get her married. Although the King was very upset, she could not obtain this renunciation. He was, at the time, still too much attached to his mistress to take the initiative himself in getting rid of her, and especially for the benefit of another man. The anxiety, however, that a guilty husband must feel beside the wife whose life is in danger, apprehension, and some slight desire, perhaps, to be free and to return to a more decent way of

living, led Louis to waver. Without absolutely consenting to what the Queen begged of him, he agreed that if La Vallière would consent to marry he would not oppose, and if necessary, he would supply a million francs as her dowry. Perhaps he was sincere. Perhaps he knew beyond a shadow of doubt that Louise would never accept. . . . Be that as it may, the promise was sufficient to make the invalid recover. In a few days she was up again.

A new form of persecution commenced from that time against Louise. It was constantly suggested to her that she should marry, that a husband should be found for her at any cost, no matter who. She refused to listen even to the names of the suitors. Some of the offers were very flattering. There was the Duc de Longueville, who had loved her for a long while and who asked her to become his duchess. He offered to take her, if she wished it, to live in luxury in a château which he owned in Guyenne. She flatly declined to listen to him. La Vallière would not exchange one love for another. So long as the King did not personally assure her that his heart had changed, he was the one man she would love and would cling to. After that, it would be to God only that she would offer her despairing lips.

"It would be easy to die," she said; "but it was impossible to give up the King."

To him she addressed bitter reproaches. The

King exonerated himself by reminding her of the circumstances. The Queen was dying and a refusal might have killed her. Louise began to realize that her love was threatened. She made a scene, reproached him, and asked him how he could for a moment think of a separation. In her rage she reminded her lover of the words he had used a year before: "I would rather kill you with a dagger or poison you than see you in the arms of another." It was true. Louis had made these mad statements. Before his weeping mistress, beautiful in the warmth of her indignation, he repeated them again. And once again the happiness, the infinite happiness of loving, gave the lovers back to one another.

It was fated that the re-birth of joy should be followed immediately by more persecutions. Although Louise was totally innocent of the exile of Vardés, as well as of the disgrace that had befallen the Comtesse de Soissons in consequence of the affair of the Spanish letter, it was on her that Olympe placed the responsibility. She repeated that it was the "demure hypocrite" who, with her sanctimonious ways, had brought misfortune on their heads, and with the consent of Madame, who knew better than anyone what were the real reasons for Vardés' downfall, she sought some means of ridding themselves of "this nuisance." Many attempts had already proved fruitless. But this time the accom-

plices planned quite an inspired scheme of villainy.

A little while later, the birth of her second child brought Louise back to the Hôtel Brion, where she lived very quietly, waiting patiently for the evening hour when the King came to visit her. More often than not these visits were clandestine, and lasted part of the night. It was thus that the mistress would have wished them always to have been. But it happened that certain evenings, feeling the need publicly to advertise a state of affairs of which he would not suffer any criticism, the King used to go to the Palais Royal, accompanied by a large suite. On these evenings they played cards and the tables were covered with gold. Those who were not permitted to join the royal game, gathered together in a room on the ground floor which opened on to the gardens, and their laughter could be heard upstairs through the windows, mingling with the sound of the ivory billiard balls.

It was past midnight after one of these parties. Everybody had left, the roadway was quite quiet, and the last torch had been put out. The silence of the gardens was only disturbed by the monotonous murmuring of the fountains falling into the lake. La Vallière was in bed; her women had been dismissed and she was just going off to sleep. A sound suddenly startled her. Her little dog had

begun to bark, and this good guardian never gave a false alarm. She heard muffled footsteps on the next room carpet. A door creaked. Louise's heart thumped as if it would burst. She remembered similar noises one night at Fontainebleau. She cried out for help. The servants heard her, but only just in time. Men fled before them, leaving ladders, cords, and hooks. They were followed, but before they had time to recover from the surprise the ruffians were far away and were never discovered. Who they were was unknown and remained unknown. No one, however, doubted as to whose were the orders that brought them there.

The whole thing was unendurable, and the King ordered that since Mme. de Soissons was so infuriated at the exile to which Vardés had been condemned, she should join him. And the next day the decree was signed for her banishment. However, as it was feared that this venomous woman might send arrows from a distance, a strict watch was kept on Louise. Patrols surrounded the Hôtel Brion, and a *maître d'hôtel* was specially engaged to taste the dishes and wines that were put on her table.

The idea of poison mingled with that of sorcery began to be talked about. Partly through the influence of the libertines (as they called the free-thinkers in those days) and partly through the slackening of custom, religion had lost some of

its prestige. It was necessary, therefore, to replace it by some other belief that would occupy the minds of the people, and at the same time satisfy the yearning that in all ages men, and especially women, have had for the supernatural. There were plenty of charlatans ready to undertake the task. A gang of people with evil reputations: alchemists, soothsayers, mediums, and fortune-tellers, spread themselves about Paris, and in a very short time collected a goodly clientèle. This was not to be wondered at. More wily than the priests, who preached patience to the people and put them off with promises of happiness to come, these new conjurers promised immediate happiness. It was child's play for their science to cure, to enrich, to discover secrets, to command devils, to inoculate love into rebellious hearts, and to perform a thousand other miracles. We can hardly believe that such humbug could have found credence, but it must not be imagined that it was only the simple and uneducated who were innocent enough to believe. The infatuation was universal. Ladies of the highest rank had their magicians and astrologers to whom they resorted in any difficulty :—

> Perdait-on un chiffon, avait-on un amant,
> Un mari vivant trop au gré de son épouse,
> Une mère fâcheuse, une femme jalouse,
> Chez la divineresse on court. . . .
>
> LA FONTAINE.

In most cases, the first consultation was not remarkable. The witch did not trust herself to go too far before knowing her client. She confined herself to advice and consented after much persuasion to make some helpful incantations. But the moment she discovered that her client was rich and determined in her passion, the whole wicked business commenced.

These astrologers celebrated black masses with all their obscene rites, including the cutting of children's throats, and for this the price of a king's ransom was claimed. If a wife was dissatisfied with her husband, they provided the famous powders which came from Italy and which a lawsuit in 1680 proved to contain arsenic.

One woman was famous above all these wretched exploiters of human misery — Catherine Montvoison, commonly known as La Voison. Married to a man who had tried several professions without success in any, and who, to use the picturesque expression of those times for people who were doing badly, "had lost his tools," she made up her mind to start on her own account. Intelligent, unscrupulous, cunning, she was born to succeed. From her youth her talent as a fortune-teller had attracted a good deal of attention on the Pont-Marie, and her career was thus clearly indicated. For some time things went on harmlessly enough. That is to say, La Voison contented herself with merely deceiving people. Then,

little by little, she began to predict a second marriage to young women who were unhappily married and to supply the way out of the difficulty. She made a speciality of sending children to heaven, and after a while she was obliged to remove her industry to an outlying part of the city, where justice would not be likely to penetrate.

It was with this debased, foul creature of the devil that the Princesse de Savoie, the haughty Comtesse de Soissons, was in negotiation. Leaving her carriage and her lackeys some distance away to avoid recognition, her face muffled up in lace, she went cautiously towards La Voison's lair, in the neighbourhood of the church of Notre-Dame-de-Bonne-Nouvelle. In a dark cellar in the midst of skeletons, and toads, and poisonous plants, and serpents, and other emblems of this kind, the sorceress was seated, wearing a black hood which looked as if it would fall over her face like a mask while she was working her spells.

The features of the great ladies of the Court were not unknown to the public. They saw them going about Paris, and the splendour of their clothes and their carriages always attracted attention. La Voison immediately recognized the lady who had come to her—a cousin of the King's, and a person of authority. What a splendid client! . . . It was, indeed, a step up for the

sorceress. It was the beginning of the splendid rogueries which, before ending at the Place de Grève, were to make her extraordinary fortune. "I must be acute," she thought as she received her visitor, and bade her be seated in the darkest corner of the hovel.

Though the Comtesse was very strong-minded, she was frightened by the sinister decorations which covered the walls.

La Voison felt that it was necessary by her first words to get hold of her superstitious mind. Examining the hand that Olympe carefully brought from under her cloak, she said :

"You have been loved by a prince."

This was wonderful ! Without knowing who she was, to be able to put her finger on the culminating point of her life !

"How did you know ? "

With an inspired air, La Voison pointed to the heavens, where all great secrets are known.

Persuaded from that moment that she was in the presence of a witch, of one of those creatures to whom the unknown is revealed, Olympe questioned her greedily. "Would she ever win back the precious heart she had lost ? "

The sorceress shook her head. She pointed out the difficulties, thus placing the services she could render at the highest price.

"I must ! " insisted the imperious Comtesse. "You must rid me of my rival ! "

The dialogue exchanged between these two women has come to us through the evidence dragged from La Voison fifteen years later by her judges. It is certainly not the best source from which to discover the truth ; but in such cases the actual truth is never discovered. The accused naturally tried to exonerate herself and to throw the responsibility on her accomplice.

" I didn't want to do it," declared the sorceress, " and I refused my help. It was only by means of threats that I was persuaded ! "

What threats, indeed ? It was probably in the following terms that they were uttered :

" If you will not help me I will find the means of vengeance elsewhere. If I cannot reach my rival I will strike further and aim higher ; I will spare nobody ; I will get rid of him as well as her, both of them." And so on.

Whatever may have been said, nothing happened. The King was only to be bewitched later by a woman even more audacious and cleverer than Olympe. And whether because the *maître d'hôtel* did his work too well, or because poison was not resorted to at all, Louise remained unhurt.

La Voison was burnt in 1680. The popular feeling was then at its height against all who had been implicated in the crimes of the sorceress. When it was discovered that La Mazarin had been one of them, she was obliged to leave France,

as her life was in danger. The reputation that Olympe had earned followed her, and she was forced many times to move from the countries she chose to live in. If any unexpected death took place in her neighbourhood, the distrust she inspired was so great that she was at once made responsible. Thus at Madrid she was accused of poisoning the young Queen, niece of Maria Teresa, who died suddenly. In these cases it is difficult to find proofs. Chemistry did not exist. Medicine was no further advanced than the "clysterium donare" of Molière. The safest thing to do when one was suspected was to take to flight. That was what the Comtesse always did. We must content ourselves with applying the proverb to her: "One only lends to the rich," and return to the year 1666.

A considerable event marked its beginning. On the 20th of January, after many months of suffering, Anne of Austria died. The courage with which she bore her suffering, and her pains, and her consistent cheerfulness, won the admiration of everyone, but though she was loved and venerated, her death did not cause any real grief. After the first surprise had passed away there was only a feeling of greater freedom. But Maria-Teresa owed her everything. In losing her she had been deprived of the only rampart which stood between the King and his wandering fancies. Monsieur had loved her truly, and

realized that with her death disappeared the only feminine face at which he had smiled with sincerity. The King himself had surrounded her with tender care during the months of her illness, and had fainted when he heard of her death. But all of them were very quickly consoled. Hearts like theirs, frivolous and with the habit of enjoyment, knew nothing of the austere art of bearing affliction for long. Death gives them a shock and upsets the course of their sluggish blood, but they quickly rid themselves of its spectre in searching for new faces, the rose-coloured faces of the future.

In all this vapid Court, with its rapid changes, La Vallière alone was faithful to the memory of the old Queen. From the day when she had admitted her to her bedside and had, with the kindness of the soul approaching God, allowed her to be seated and had talked to her without severity, the heart of the young sinner had gone out to the Queen. In that august presence, and before the conscience which judged her by the code of Christian morality, she had been genuinely ashamed, and her sin had caused her fearful remorse. But at the same time, Louise had felt a sort of protection. It seemed to her as if with the extreme sensibility of her soul she had seen beyond the outward severity the inevitable affection, and the gentle interest, that a mother always has for the woman who loves her son. Perhaps

also, she foresaw the time that was to come, when freed from his wise guardian, the King was to be emancipated indeed.

The first act of Louis, after his mother's death, was to sign a decree making his mistress lady-in-waiting to Maria-Teresa. Louise did not want this honour which was an outrage against the Queen. She would, as always, have preferred to remain in the background. But as we have already said, Louis XIV loved the absolutism which would not allow any opposition. He intended to use his mistress as a means of forcing his wife to accept his authority.

Not having her mother-in-law any longer to fight her battles, Maria-Teresa allowed the appointment to pass. Many people were surprised.

"Why!" whispered the magistrates of the Cour des Comptes, assembled in the vestibule of the Louvre to offer their condolences on the death of Anne, "the Queen now has her rival in her own household!"

"Yes," they were told, "out of regard for the King, in which she proves herself very wise."

La Vallière was at the height of favour, but she made no effort to establish her position or to create friendships whose support she had so far lacked, and the want of which had exposed her to so many intrigues. She devoted herself entirely to her love. She did not know, and would never know, how to do anything else but love.

Shut up in her apartments, she would think of the King, or rather meditate in the same way as mystics lose themselves in God, until they have no other thought but Him. Louise was, of course, far too sensitive and too fearful not to be always troubled by the dreadful outlook constantly before her eyes—that one day she would not be loved any more. "Then," she would say to herself, "what will friends and relations matter? Who can relieve my misery? Only my God will be left to me!" Alone in her seclusion, where the hours were passed in waiting and longing for her beloved, knowing nothing of the plots brewing round her, she neglected to surround herself with those means of defence which, in the days of her declining favour, would have been so useful to her.

There was one person on whose devotion she could rely—her brother. But although his sincere attachment as well as his interest bound Jean-François to Louise, fate willed it that the grave errors, the presumption, and the impossible frivolity of the young man's nature, helped to ruin her. It was, at any rate, one of his many mistakes that caused the first signs of disgrace which, though vague as yet, were still undeniable, and which were to spread from him to his sister and envelop her like a cloud.

The Queen-Mother had just died. Everyone, in accordance with the unalterable custom of a

Court where grief as well as pleasure are provided for, offered their condolences according to rank and precedence. Although he might have known that he was the last person who had the right, Jean-François de La Vallière addressed himself direct to the King, and wrote to him in terms which bordered on the familiar.

If there was one thing in the world which Louis XIV never forgave, it was that his subjects should forget the distance which raised him above them. A sudden resentment took the place of the kindness with which hitherto he had tolerated the gaucheries of Louise's brother, and he sent him the following curt reply: "Monsieur Le Marquis de La Vallière, that which I have suffered in the loss of my mother surpasses the powers of your imagination, and to answer you briefly I would have you know that only the hand that has struck the cruel blow is capable of allaying it."

Of course, Louise was ignorant of all this. Her lover did not desire to make her responsible for it; but no one is master of those imperceptible sensations that affect the heart, and invisibly harden it. The brother having been impertinent, it is easy to imagine that the sister might appear less beautiful, less refined, and less charming. In any case, it was at this time that the first serious infidelity to Louise occurred.

Since the failure of Mlle. de la Motte-Houdancourt, no one had even thought of trying to

attract the glances of the King, knowing how deeply he was in love. However, it was not necessary for anyone to intervene to make him see the distracting charms of the Princesse de Monaco. His intrigue with that lady might have passed unnoticed if a fussy, observant, gossiping braggart, a veritable Gascon, had not meddled in it. Antonin Nompar, Marquis de Puyguilhem, later Comte, and then Duc de Lauzun, had just arrived at Court. He had accompanied his beautiful cousin, whose maiden name was Charlotte de Grammont, and with whom he was desperately in love. This fair little man, with his insolence and his cunning, always made trouble wherever he went. Having noticed that the King was making love to the Princess, he took up a bullying attitude and swore that if the intrigue was not ended he would warn her husband, who was at the other end of France ruling his state. As these threats produced no effect, the mad rage of the Midi took hold of him. Behaving in an abominably cruel way to the woman he professed to love, he took advantage of the fact that she was sitting on the ground beside the table where the King was playing, to stamp on her right hand with his heel. Screams from the lady followed, and she fainted. The next day Lauzun was in the Bastille. The desperate fellow, however, did not stay there long. He soon got out again, and with many ups and downs continued

to follow his extraordinary fortunes, of which La Bruyère has written : " No other man has dreamed as he has lived."

Although the follies of the Marquis de La Vallière had prejudiced his sister in the eyes of the King, it is equally reasonable to suppose that she shared in the momentary return to favour which the young officer enjoyed after his brilliant conduct at the war. Louis XIV, having signed an alliance with Holland, had been forced to send help to that country, which was invaded by a band of plunderers in the pay of the Bishop of Munster. Anxious to keep his word, he hastened to get his regiments together and to select captains to lead them to battle. The regiment of the Dauphin's Light Horse, composed of picked men and recently newly equipped at great expense, received orders to lay siege to the Citadelle which the warlike prelate held with eight hundred soldiers. The Marquis de La Vallière was in command : " My son's regiment," wrote the King to him, " is in as good condition as I could wish it to be. It is not necessary to tell you that you must use all your endeavours to maintain it. You know how important this is to enable you to gain your wish of doing something brilliant should the occasion present itself. I hope with all my heart that you will find it soon," etc. . . .

These instructions, of course, stimulated the captain's zeal ; although this was hardly necessary

as he was certainly brave. Jean-François was born with the soul which is truly French, which becomes alert and quivers at the sound of the trumpet. Hurriedly leaving the ballet that he was dancing, his ardour placed him at the head of his regiment in a very few hours, and he immediately started on his campaign. In his blue coat embroidered in silver, his white silk scarf, and his three-cornered hat with feathers, the young man looked every bit as elegant as if he had not been interrupted in the quadrilles.

The enemy was entrenched in a very strong position. At the summons to surrender, they replied proudly that they would not do so while they had a bit of gunpowder left in their possession. The attack then commenced with such force and vigour that the enemy lost six hundred men — two-thirds, in fact, of their strength — and abandoned the place with arms and ammunition.

When it was known in Paris that the fortress had fallen, the Marquis was acclaimed everywhere. At Court they spoke of no one else, of his bravery, and his wonderful activity. The ambassador of Holland complimented him. All this was more than enough to make the King forget his displeasure. Taking up the pen again, with which a few days before he had rebuked the young man, he now praised him. "The work you have accomplished is so commendable that

I cannot help expressing my satisfaction in this letter," etc. . . .

A few days after, the return of the victor was celebrated. A series of reviews, balls, and feasts were organized in his honour. Ladies threw ribbons at him, and it was a veritable joy for Louise to see her brother, whom she loved so dearly, covered with such complete glory. He had never felt nearer to her, or more worthy of being loved, than on the day when, riding at the head of his regiment, he placed the enemy's flag at the feet of the sovereign. The same blood ran in their veins, and they were both ready to shed the last drop of it in the master's service.

Louise felt all this even more deeply, because at that time a new token of her love palpitated in her bosom. This time it was a daughter she gave to the King ; a girl who replaced the two boys who had died without having been known by those who had begat them. This child, however, lived and became as beautiful and seductive as her mother. She had her pale silvery hair, her sylph-like figure, and her delightful mind. A royal edict legitimatized her under the name of Mlle. de Blois, and later, her marriage with Louis-Armand de Bourbon, Prince de Conti, washed out the stain of her birth, and made her a real princess of the blood.

The arrival into the world, however, of Marie-Anne was as secret as that of her brothers, even

more so, as circumstances this time rendered the situation more difficult. Since the month of August, 1666, the Court had moved to Vincennes, and the courtiers lived more closely together owing to the smallness of the château. By being very careful, and with the help of cunningly contrived dresses, La Vallière succeeded in hiding her condition. Suddenly, one October morning, while she was dressing, the pains began. The King was away and she no longer had time to go to the Hôtel Brion. She had to go to bed then and there. By a strange complication, her room was in the passage which led to the apartments of Madame and those of the Queen. People were constantly passing to and fro. The custom of dressing in public was so usual that keys were never thought of.

In the meantime the pains increased every moment ; Louise was exhausted, but she strangled her screams in her throat. Suddenly footsteps were heard. Quickly a screen was placed round the poor martyr to hide her sufferings. The doors opened and the attendants announced : "Madame." The last name in the world that she wanted to hear at that moment ! What an added humiliation ! Proudly Louise pulled herself together and suffered in silence. But Henrietta had a quick ear. A noise from the other end of the room reached her. She went forward and looked curiously over the screen with a question-

MLLE. DE BLOIS, PRINCESSE DE CONTI

Etched by Mercier, from the painting by Nattier

ing glance to see what was the matter. In agony, Louise complained of slight indigestion, and Madame went away suspecting nothing of the atrocious drama which was being enacted.

At last the midwife was brought in.

"Be quick," ordered La Vallière bravely; "before the Princess returns to her room it must all be over."

As if a crime was being hidden, the work was hurried through and finished. They smothered the cries of the infant and took it out by a secret door. All traces of the event were removed. A superstition of the time had it that flowers were fatal to women in labour. So as to avert all suspicion, Louise ordered her room to be filled with flowers. And when, an hour later, the attendants announced the passage of Henrietta of England, the brave patient got up and slipped into a gorgeous gown, and made the bow that etiquette demanded. Drops of sweat appeared under the rouge. She was almost at the end of her strength; but her mind was stronger. It was absolutely necessary that nobody should guess the truth.

Why should she have endangered her life in this way when she had everything to make her cling to it? To that question there is always the same answer. Louise was ashamed. In spite of her sin, she was so modest that even after she was created Duchess her contemporaries continued to call her Mlle. de La Vallière, and the centuries

have placed this same virginal name on her grave, as a never-fading crown of purity. The Christian that existed in her, together with the sinner, trembled at being the cause of scandal. She was tortured with fearful remorse. After each fall, she threw herself on her knees and asked God's pardon. She longed to turn away from her wickedness. . . . But that meant that she would have to give up loving, and love was for her the very breath of her existence, her food and her drink. She could never give it up.

She was also affected by another sentiment. Louise had a very profound respect for royalty. To give birth, under the same roof as the Queen, to a child of the husband whose heart she had taken away from her, seemed to her refined feelings an abominable offence. She decided, therefore, that even if she died in the attempt she would behave as if nothing had happened. It was thus that her presence that same night in the *salons* gave the lie to any rumours that might have been afloat.

Louis XIV was away that day. He who, when her first child was born, had been so tenderly anxious and had refused to leave the bedside of the suffering young mother, was invisible. Louise was not alarmed or suspicious. Her trusting soul still hovered in the regions of illusion. She only thought it was bad luck. As she herself had been taken by surprise, she thought he was unaware

of what had happened. The news, however, had reached the King. It had been secretly sent to him by courier. Louise made excuses for him, thinking that perhaps some urgent affairs had kept him. If only she had known! Louis was visiting a lace manufactory. Without putting himself out in the slightest, he continued to make his selections and to send them to the ladies he wished to honour, and he returned late to Vincennes, when his purchases had been made.

His mistress welcomed his return with joy. . . . And he, seeing her smile so heroically seated at the gaming table where she played every night, must surely have said to himself: "There is not one of my soldiers who serves me more bravely than she!"

CHAPTER VII

THE RIVAL

BEFORE she had quite recovered from the tax to which she had subjected her strength, La Vallière was caught up in a whirlwind of pleasure. The fêtes at Versailles followed those at St. Germain, or rather, it should be said that each royal residence in turn rivalled the other in providing the frivolous Court with balls, hunting-parties, masquerades, and ballets. It took even less than that to amuse them :—

> La Ramasse, l'escarpolette,
> Le volant avec la raquette
> Et autres petits jeux nouveaux,
> La chasse, le vol des oiseaux.

The young Court, no longer hampered by the presence of the old face of Anne of Austria framed in its black veils, threw itself wildly into amusements and dissipations, in the desire not to lose a single moment of the joyous youth which passes away so quickly and which is regretted so long. Never to stop to think that one day they would cease to be beautiful, and happy, and loved, was the law that governed these grown-up children.

The only person among them who was serious-minded was Louise. She was not amused by the wild orgies. They tired her physically, and her soul felt an exile among the follies of luxury. She was much more adapted to the quiet walks alone with her lover, the tender, secret meetings and the quiet obscurity of the first days of her love. But the will of her lover was still her law. He insisted that she should take part in everything. To please him she obeyed, and tried to be gay. It even seemed as if she were more anxious now to be a success than she had been. Perhaps she began to feel that she would have to struggle to keep her place in his heart. The feverish grace with which she danced round Apollo's Chariot in the ballet of the Muses revealed an unusual eagerness. There was reason for these signs of anxiety. The little feet stamped on the ground as if they were trying to crush a shadow. Louise had begun to fear. But her triumph was quite equal to those that had preceded it, and Benserade still sung her praises. The verses he composed in her honour were even more flattering than before :—

Vous en qui le ciel a mis
Ce qu'il donne à ses amis ;
De la beauté, du cœur, de la sagesse
Et, si j'en crois vos yeux, de la tendresse ;
Que peut-on vous souhaiter ? Quel bien ?

Truly there seemed nothing wanting to complete her happiness when she sat beside the King during the entr'actes—La Vallière was still the woman loved, the woman triumphant. She was smiled on and admired, and yet, with the presentiment of a heart that loves, she felt that something threatened her happiness. In that same ballet in which she had been applauded, there had appeared beside her a Muse, a beautiful shining Nymph, a woman on whom the King's glances had been constantly turned.

The absence of Athénaïs had not lasted as long as Louise had hoped. . . . She was determined not to bury her wondrous beauty, to live in exile and hide her charms in the provinces, charms which had been created to be admired! In spite of the entreaties of her husband, who adored his young wife and wished to remain her only admirer, the Marquise de Montespan had again taken her place at Versailles. The time that she had been absent had not been wasted. Under the sun of Gascony the fruit of her beauty had ripened, and now was splendid enough to be coveted by the highest. Her return had been dazzling. Her friends—and she had many — raved about her. Having learnt at an early age that it is dangerous to try and walk alone in the rugged country of the Court, she had been carefully collecting clever and powerful allies. When the time came, she found

them ready with advice and support, and she entered the lists to begin her brilliant career. Under the patronage of her sister, the clever Mme. de Thianges, she managed to get Monsieur on her side, and even perhaps tried to charm him. By relating amusing stories at the house of Mlle. de Montpensier she gained her support. Lauzun and Roquelaure sung her praises everywhere. One of her cleverest and, at the same time, most unscrupulous devices was to assure herself of the good graces of the Queen. Knowing the most unfailing method of achieving this, she put on the mask of religion. To listen to her, one would have thought she went to mass every morning.

Maria-Teresa, who at the beginning had looked on her pretty face with the mistrust that she always felt for all those whom she thought might be likely to attract the King, ended by being completely reassured. "Such virtue," she thought, "must avert all danger." Therefore, when there was a vacancy amongst her ladies-in-waiting, Athénaïs was chosen out of six candidates.

From that moment her beauty was in evidence. Her carriage caused her to be noticed. At balls and theatres she wore loud dresses. She had a clear, sonorous laugh. What she said was full of point. During the hunts she always managed to gallop next to the King. She never took her eyes off him. There was no kind of coquetry that she did not invent to please him. The King was

interested at that time in military affairs, and the Marquise accompanied him to reviews and visited the camps with him. "At the head of the other ladies," relates Mme. Chatrier to her correspondent De Varsovie, "rides Mme. de Montespan dressed in a mannish coat of scarlet, wearing a cap after the English fashion with a bunch of nodding plumes." It was impossible not to remark the jacket or the cap. And besides, the King was far too sensible of feminine charms to escape from the passionate glances that were constantly levelled at him. Apart from this, the courtiers who were in league with the Marquise were there to accentuate her charms. Roquelaure compared her to a goddess. "And how witty!" proclaimed Lauzun. The King did not delay in offering the Marquise the lover-like homage in which he excelled. In her honour he danced and composed songs. Little by little the Court remarked the double tie of desire and ambition which was to unite them and keep them tightly bound together, and in its solid grip was to destroy their gentle victim.

The new attraction began to be discreetly discussed. Many people saw Louise's favour fading away with sorrow, but at the same time many rejoiced at it. Without taking sides, the Duc d'Enghien prophesied: "This winter will bring about much trouble at Court." Many cruel songs were privately circulated:—

On dit que La Vallière
S'en va sur son déclin,
Montespan prend sa place,
Il faut que tout y passe
Ainsi de main en main.

As an explanation of Louise's disgrace, her slanderers were pleased to blame her intelligence. Gifted, they agreed, to a remarkable degree and possessed of a loving heart, still she did not amuse the King. But these were only pretexts. Although Louise had neither the vivacity nor the bantering spirit of Montespan, "her wit," Bussy-Rabutin, who was not indulgent towards her, assures us, "was delightful." And as a proof of this he relates the following anecdote: "One day the Duchesse de Mazarin, who was very stupid, made one of her customary malaproprisms before the whole Court. Everybody laughed, and her lover, the Prince de Courtenay, felt so uncomfortable that he blushed up to his wig. The King leant towards his mistress and whispered in her ear: 'How much I thank you for never saying anything but that which is charming and pleasing! Otherwise, I should die of shame.'" She had, indeed, a most refined and cultivated wit. Many of the sayings attributed to her, and the writings that we have of hers, are undeniable proofs of this. It was not to her want of intelligence that the King's detachment was due. The reason was much more simple and quite easy to explain.

When a new passion enticed Louis, it meant that the old one had run its course. A fickle heart like his could never be fixed in one place for long. After the charms of an idyll, he asked for stronger sensations. The exquisite grace and the secret treasures of affection had had their day, to be succeeded by those of pride and triumphant sensuality.

In the Museum of Dresden there is a picture painted by Netscher which gives an idea of what Mme. de Montespan was like at that time—a miracle of beauty. Her hair, dressed with pearls, is like the light of dawn ; her eyes, which afterwards grew haughty, are still full of languor ; the words she is about to speak laugh on her lips. There is no poem comparable to the perfection of her hands. In one of them she is crushing a lily ; the rose that she holds in the other is not so fresh as her cheeks. Although she was two years younger, La Vallière looked the elder. The delicate colouring of her skin was beginning to fade. The repeated trials of motherhood, and above all, the poison of anxiety, had withered her first freshness. It was useless for her to wear a ribbon to improve the lines of her throat. It was always thin. She looked sad and worried.

A print of the period shows her seated in front of her mirror, holding in her hand a handkerchief with which she is drying her eyes. The

King enters, looking spruce and slim, and dressed with his customary supreme elegance. It is easy to reconstruct the scene that followed. Louis asked his mistress why she was crying. Louise hesitated and scarcely dared to answer. It is so difficult sometimes to put into words that which exists in the imagination. But the master would not tolerate secrets and he pressed her :

" Tell me ! What is the matter ? "

" What should I do if my face ceased to charm you ! "

Louis had, as yet, never admitted the possibility even to himself. In spite of his attentions to Athénaïs, he was sure that he was still very much in love with La Vallière. He said that it was only her foolish imagination.

But his mistress was not so easily reassured. Since she had gone so far she would see it through to the end. Her heart relieved itself of the fearful burden that had been oppressing it.

" Is there not, Sire, among the ladies of the Court, someone whom you love better than me ? "

And as she spoke her humble complaint her big eyes filled with tears.

Louis questioned himself sincerely. Could it be possible that in a few days the feelings that he had felt for the last six years of his life, and which were all the world to him, had ceased to exist ? The words, the vows, which he had

thought eternal, were they nothing but illusions? Could it be that there remained nothing of the love that had possessed him body and soul? . . . Was such destruction possible? For the moment he forgot the new charmer, and said with the exaggerated zeal of a man not entirely sure of the strength of the argument he is putting forward, but trying hard to convince himself:

"What, after all, is a beautiful face? A very small thing can destroy it. That which binds me to you, Louise, is something more lasting. . . . I love your qualities, your noble and generous character, which will last as long as you live. I adore your heart, which would have loved me even if I had not worn a crown, that heart which is not dazzled by honours, or any of the things that other women covet, and which has remained untainted in the midst of corruption."

While the King was speaking, Louise slipped down on her knees. She took hold of the dear hands, whose caresses she knew so well, and covered them with happy kisses.

"Ah, my dear lord! How well you know me. . . . No woman will ever love you as I do."

She did, indeed, love him and Louis was sure of it. But the time had passed when kisses, and words, and tears, were sufficient to hold his heart. Thirsting for stronger and newer sensations he turned towards the woman who, for the present, was able to give them to him.

From that time Louise was left alone, at one time a prey to remorse, at another tortured with jealousy. Without relations or friends to give her courage, besieged by beggars who took advantage of her good nature, eclipsed by the most dangerous and enterprising of rivals, she was beaten at last. Brought together by a sort of desire to vie with each other, to watch the blows given and received, the two women never left each other. Where one was seen, there immediately was the other. They smiled on each other and talked amiably together . . . but hell was at the bottoms of their hearts. Seeing them thus side by side, the difference between them was very evident. People made comparisons and weighed their several merits. La Vallière's soul was undoubtedly superior to that of La Montespan ; but though the nobility of the one could inspire the tenderest sentiments, the other, like the courtesans of old, exercised an irresistible attraction. Her beauty was seductive, and the King's senses were carried away by it, and, at the same time, he was amused by her wit, which lifted him out of the dreary pleasures of greatness. The rivals were the complement of each other, and they appeared to have been created for no other purpose than the amusement of a voluptuous monarch, to offer him all the pleasure and excitement of contrast.

Louise was not at her best. She was going to

be a mother again, and this made her look heavy and pale, and languishing. Her mirror, which she consulted frequently, reflected someone that was not her, the image of a woman dull and quite changed. She grew frightened and anxious. She longed not to be seen and wanted to hide herself, as before, in her apartments, and wait, veiled in semi-darkness, until her face became fresh again. . . . But she dared not leave her post and make room for her rival. Besides, the latter did not give her any choice. With the arrogance of success, she invaded the pavilion where La Vallière lived at Versailles, installed herself there and monopolized the conversation.

At the beginning, the retiring disposition which made her so lovable caused Louise to put up with, and even to encourage, the usurpation. She thought that perhaps the King might find her house more agreeable if it were brightened by the presence of Athénaïs, and that he would spend more time there. Little by little she began to realize her mistake. The King certainly came more often and spent hours at her house ; but it was not for her. He only had eyes for Mme. de Montespan. She exercised her allurements on him ; she had the knack of amusing him and keeping him. Making fun of people was her favourite pastime. She sacrificed, not only outsiders, but her best and most devoted friends, and even those who were in love with her. It is a

dangerous game to play, and many of those who had helped to make her fortune began to turn away from her. But she did not care, as long as she had the approval of the one person she wanted to please. And he listened to her with all ears, and laughed heartily at the caricatures drawn by her malice. Unhappy, indeed, were they whom she undertook to ridicule. A certain Demoiselle de Pousse aspired to attract the royal favour, and very soon repented of her folly. The Marquise was annoyed and hurled a volley of pitiless mockery at her, the King could not help laughing, and this made it impossible for him to make love to the young lady.

It is said that the following malicious verses were written by De Montespan, and were circulated from hand to hand among the courtiers, and, indeed, were only unknown by the victim of them :—

> Soyez boiteuse, ayez quinze ans
> Pas de gorge, fort peu de sens,
> Des parents, Dieu sait ! Faites, en fille neuve
> Dans l'antichambre vos enfants,
> Sur ma foi, vous aurez le premier des amants,
> Et La Vallière en est la preuve.

The luxurious life led by Mme. de Montespan soon ran her into debt. At first her debts consisted mostly of small sums borrowed from members of her family, claims for overdue rent, in order, it was said, " to equip the Marquis to go and fight

in Lorraine." Presently his wife had her own expenses. Her wretched dowry was not enough to defray the cost of carriages and dresses, and the rest. Bills were signed for eight, twelve, twenty thousand pounds; and there were still accounts left unpaid. At last her creditors grew impatient, and Athénaïs had to fight against their threats. To meet the demands of the most troublesome, she was reduced, in 1665, to pawning three big diamonds which she had received as a wedding present. The next year they were followed by a string of pearls. Then her resources were exhausted, and she was at a loss as to what to do next, or whose assistance to ask. In the meanwhile, the liabilities were accumulating, and it became absolutely necessary to find a way out.

It was then that she recognized in the King a helper sent by providence. The Marquise saw in Louis, not the lusty, well-knit lover, nor the much-lauded hero. The difficulties in which she was placed only allowed her to see the royal wealth, the flood of gold that she required so badly and which a word from him would shower on her creditors.

Sure as she was of the attraction of her charms, she did not dare to trust entirely to them to beguile the King. So many before her had tried to dethrone La Vallière and had failed. She wanted to make sure of a powerful supporter. It

THE CHÂTEAU OF VERSAILLES

From the collection of A. M. Broadley

only remained to decide who it should be. Mme. de Montespan would not have belonged to her century if she had not been imbued with its universal characteristic. She had been brought up by a mother who spent the best part of her days at church, and she had received, if not a deep impression of religion, at any rate, a taste for ceremonies and mysteries. Following the line taken by the Comtesse de Soissons, Mlle. de la Motte, Houdancourt, La Montalais, d'Artigny, and many others, she went secretly to La Voison. Such a step seems astonishing for the woman of whom Saint-Simon has said: "Her greatness was obvious," to take, but everything may be done to gain the love of a king, and the Marquise would have sold her soul to the devil to gain her ends. Perhaps she did, on the day when, instructed by a scoundrelly priest, she took a leading part in the celebration of a black mass. In the course of this pitiful sacrilege, the names of Astaroth and Asmodée, Princes of Love, replaced the name of God. It was to these infernal divinities that the consecration was offered, and it was from their omnipotent power that Mme. de Montespan implored the fall of her rival.

The answer to her prayers was not as prompt or as complete as she had been led to hope, and the Marquise soon repeated the experience. This time the atrocious was added to the obscene. The blood of a little child was shed—a poor little thing

bought for a few écus from its mother, on the excuse that it was required to be nursed by a woman who had too much milk.

Certain symptoms felt at this time by Louis XIV lead to the belief that an infamous drug was mixed with his food, "in order," the sorceress had promised, "to assure Mme. de Montespan by this means the exclusive possession of the much disputed royal heart." In any case, the scoundrels who were tried in 1680, at the time of the famous case known as the Poisons Cause, said so. But they did not adhere to the allegation. The judge, Reynie, who held the inquiry, paled at the mention of such names as the Maréchal de Luxembourg, the Comte de Clermont, who belonged to the Royal Family, the Duchesse de Bouillon, a Polignac, and many others. Racine himself was alarmed, and the courts decided that the honour of France was in danger of being compromised, so the affair was partly suppressed. A few wretches were burnt alive and others managed to escape. It would have been better to have left them to their foul work than to have compromised the renown of a reign whose glory had at that time reached its height.

In the meanwhile, according to his usual method of being interested at once with love and politics, Louis XIV was preparing for a new war. The pretext was to uphold the rights of Maria-Teresa in Brabant. The real reason was to satisfy

his growing desire to extend his power. After several months of preparation, during which he tried to gain the support of the Courts of Europe for his claims, hostilities were declared on the 8th of May, 1667. The news that the army would be under way during the following week was received with enthusiasm by a number of young lords, impatient to show their bravery. After so many feasts, and tourneys, on which they had wasted their energy, they were anxious to be at the head of real troops and to fight real battles.

On the eve of leaving French soil there were many duties for Louis XIV to discharge. The first thing was to put himself right with the Church. He had not thought of this for several years. Love had taken the place of religion and of thoughts of Paradise and the Sacrament, and had even out-voiced his conscience. But for once he was obedient to the advice of Bossuet, who had preached so long in vain, and he went to Communion on Easter Sunday in his parish church.

This was a warning to his mistress. Though she might struggle against her rivals on earth, what could her religious heart do in a struggle against heaven? . . . She did not even dare to pray. How could she say: "Not Thou, my God! Me! Me!"

Louis' act of religion was followed by the report that La Vallière had been created a Duchess. She refused to believe it. No formalities

had been gone through. She had not even been consulted, and she did not think that the King would treat her in this way. But the news was true.

The decree was registered in the parliament by letters patent, dated the 13th of May, 1667. It was a curious mixture of affection and independence, an example of sovereign audacity. Here it is :

" The favours of kings being the outward sign of the worthiness of those who receive them, and the most glorious praise of the subject honoured by them, we, Louis, by the grace of God King of France and of Navarre, believe we cannot better express publicly the special esteem in which we hold the person of our dear and well-beloved and very trusty Louise de La Vallière, than by conferring on her the highest titles of honour to which she is entitled by the quite exceptional affection inspired in our heart by her many rare virtues. And though her modesty has often been opposed to our desire to have raised her before this to a position in keeping with our esteem and her good qualities, still the affection in which we hold her and our sense of justice does not permit of our delaying any further in recording our recognition and our gratitude for merits so apparent to us."

This was followed by a statement setting out that the domain of Vaujours, situated in Touraine, and the barony of Saint-Christophe, in

Anjou, were raised to a duchy, and both were provided with considerable revenues.

Louise was now a wealthy duchess and cousin to the King, and she who had so long pined in humility had her place among the great personages of the kingdom. But this did not make her happy. Her sweet face did not bear the expression which made it so attractive when it was alight with joy. She did not glory in her success or think that at last her time had come. Her soul was sad to its very depths. The instinct of a woman in love made her distrustful. She wondered what had prompted the King to this action. During the time he had loved her he had not thought of giving her titles or honours. And all at once, she began to realize the truth, and feel the hard, cruel indifference which placed her on the level of a servant who is paid for work done before being discharged.

This was not all. Imitating Henry IV, his ancestor whom he most admired, Louis openly acknowledged his illegitimate offspring. The child whose secret birth had almost cost Louise her life, the daughter from whom she had consented to be separated, was publicly recognized and legitimatized. Later, in the memoirs addressed to the Dauphin, Louis XIV tried to justify this double act of his, which placed him above morality and law, by the fact that he ran the risk of being killed at the war : " Not having resolved to join

the army with the idea of keeping out of danger, I thought that it was only fair to give this child the rank that her birth entitled her to, and to the mother a settlement suitable to the affection that I had for her."

This having been said, and the acts, which, after all, were generous, having been executed, Louis did not make any further show of affection for her who had inspired them. While he loaded her with honours, his coldness took away from her the one thing to which she attached any value. Titles, fortune, castles, were registered in the name of his mistress, but the King did not even seem to remember that she was again going to be a mother. He ignored this child and made no depositions in its favour. "What a difference!" Louise exclaimed, "between the brother and the sister! The one a legitimate duchess, and the other an unconsidered bastard!"

However, La Vallière did not lose hope entirely, and prepared to follow the King to Flanders, he having decided that the whole Court was to take part in the campaign. Mme. de Montespan's place was appointed, but not La Vallière's. Under the pretext that she ought to look after her health, she was ordered to remain at Versailles, and while she cried and despaired, the King left in the midst of a troop of ladies. Not knowing to whom to go for consolation, Louise wrote to her so-called friend, Mme. de Montausier: "If they

think that they will reconcile me to my retirement by throwing me ambition as food for my soul, they are making a mistake! I have suffered disdain more patiently than I can suffer wages paid to me as if I were a servant. Nobody doubts that my love has been disinterested, and everyone knows that among all the King's qualities his crown has always appeared to me the least considerable." She wrote page after page in the same strain, pouring out the noble indignation of her misunderstood heart. Sometimes she hoped to see the King return, "safe and glorious, with as much love for her as he had ever had." Soon even this faint hope died. It was heralded by a repetition of persecutions. Once again suggestions of a marriage were made to her, and the King was no longer there to repeat his assurance that he would rather see her dead than in the arms of another. The husbands suggested this time were sometimes Lauzun, the professional lady-killer, an insipid courtier whom she disliked; and sometimes Vardés, Mme. de Soissons' lover, sent away many times and taken back again, and he disgusted her.

It was the Queen who favoured these projects. Maria-Teresa was not very keen-witted, and she had not yet realized that the King had tired of La Vallière. Far from thinking that he was about to begin a new intrigue, she remembered the promise her husband had made her: "At the

age of thirty I shall become a faithful husband," and only thought that his conversion had taken place a year before its time.

It must be admitted actual circumstances helped this illusion. The new campaign had for its object the proclaiming of the rights of the Infanta, the daughter of Philippe IV, and it seemed a proof of conjugal solicitude. In any case, the Queen was persuaded that it was so. Flatterers and poets assured her that the war ought to be called "her war," and proclaimed that she was its soul and its leader. As a further proof, the King insisted that she should accompany the army. "Your presence will help me to conquer," he said to her. "The sight of your youth and freshness and your kindly air will make the French rule dear to the Flemish people, although ill-disposed persons have taught them to distrust it."

Maria-Teresa listened with pleasure. She already saw herself the associate, the indispensable partner in the glory that Louis was to gain. She would have him all to herself for the future. She wished that there should be no one to dispute him with her. Overcoming the discomfort of travelling in her present state, in fact, her natural dislike to travelling at any time, the Queen gave orders for her coach to be prepared. In four days she would join the King at Compiègne. Before leaving, however, she would like to

conclude the marriage of La Vallière and make sure by this means that the guilty chain was definitely broken. She was certain, however, that she would not attain her ends without great care and precaution. Maria-Teresa decided to invite the new Duchess to visit her, and putting aside the haughty manner she generally used to her, she was full of civility and compliments.

Louise was not to be taken in. When once distrust has entered a soul naturally straightforward, it is suspicious of everything. She wondered what concessions would be expected of her in return for the change of attitude. "The reception and the kindly manner in which she received me," Louise wrote, "seemed to be a tacit prayer." When she afterwards learnt the reason for this change of front, she was outraged. "Does the Queen forget that the repugnance of my heart has a stronger reason than mere dislike! Does she not know that I am incapable of breaking an oath that I have once made? My love will never change. I will never marry."

When she had made this proud answer, Louise was well aware that the hatred of Maria-Teresa would constantly pursue her. She lost her peace of mind and could not even sleep. She wrote to the confidante, Mme. de Montausier, who was at Compiègne, and from whom she had hopes of friendly intervention: "Sometimes the Queen reproaches me and blames me for the King's

indifference ; sometimes she tells me that I must retire to Vaujours and never return to Court." All this anguish was added to that which she already suffered at her beloved's absence. He was at the war. Perhaps he might fall ill or a bullet might strike him. If any accident happened to him, what would become of her ? " I cannot see the arrival of the courier without trembling," she writes ; " fear has taken possession of my imagination, and I see nothing but ill-fortune before me." The cruel lonely days seemed interminable, in that magic Versailles which had been the scene of her happiness. The surroundings were the same. The murmuring waters, the flower gardens, the terraces, the marbles and the bronzes, still expressed the joy of living. There was not a path or a shrub which did not awaken smiling memories. The sun still lighted up the shining façade of the château ; the windows shone like steel. But Louise only went out at nights, at the hour when the blaze is extinguished and when the setting sun reflects its cold embers. She used to wander sadly and alone. Her heart felt the oppression which precedes great disasters. But she did not utterly despair. The news which she had so far received was not serious.

" Wholly occupied with military affairs," she was told, " the King has separated himself from the Court." He had left Mme. de Montespan, de Montausier, de Fiennes, du Roure, with the

Queen; and taking his work seriously, he advanced north to meet the Spanish troops. His gaiety and enjoyment can hardly be described. No leader had ever enjoyed the prestige that he did. Born to command, he excelled in its exercise; he succeeded with as much ease as he did in fencing bouts, in which he was always first. His troops were proud of him, of his bravery, and of the elegance of his manner. He appealed to them by that most telling of all resources, example. He was everywhere. He personally visited the forts and the outposts. In time of danger he never left the night guard, and he slept on straw and woke at the sound of the bugle. He did all this with good grace, and without appearing to be more tired than when he danced the ballet of Hercules. There was no danger, however, for the moment. Turenne took care to keep that at a distance. Naturally prudent and rendered even more circumspect by having to safeguard the life of the sovereign, the great marshal advanced very slowly. This proved to be a clever move. In six weeks, and almost without a shot having been fired, the French took possession of several strongholds; notably, Charleroi, the key to Brabant. These first successes turned the head of Louis XIV. He was impatient to exhibit the flags taken from the enemy, and to appear as a real warrior before the ladies, who until then had only seen him as a hero on parade. Taking

advantage of the rest which the troops were asking for, he returned to Compiègne, where a great ovation awaited him. The place was hung with banners, the streets strewn with flowers, and laurels, and palm leaves, and processions of the prettiest girls in the country celebrated the entry of the conqueror.

One arrangement had been overlooked ; where the King should be lodged. Impossible as it may seem, and strange, in an age where etiquette had almost become a cult, the King did not know where to sleep. No one was better able to adapt himself to the adventures of travelling, and, like a good traveller, he made the best of everything and insisted that the others should do the same. He had made over to Mlle. de Montpensier the room next to the Queen, which he had occupied the last time he was at Compiègne, and she had had possession of it ever since. His bed was put up in an ante-chamber, a huge room which was quite as good as any other, and only separated from the apartments of the ladies-in-waiting by a little staircase—just sufficient to excite temptation.

All this was so ingenious and so conveniently arranged that one is almost tempted to think that there had been some voluntary intervention on the part of a courtier-lackey, and the name of Lauzun comes naturally to one's mind. Having made his début by being sent to the Bastille, the

cunning Gascon was eager to be revenged. He had scarcely left his cell when he began to look about for an opportunity. With his crafty appearance, his tiny, well-made figure, and his insolence, he managed to slip into every vacant place. At Versailles, at Saint-Germain, he was to be met with in the most exclusive *salons*, where he was at once at his ease, amusing the ladies, flattering the lords of high rank, toadying to all who might be useful to him. He had a talent for all this, and it eventually made his fortune. The influence of his protectors had won for him a command in a regiment of dragoons, one of those superb regiments which the King had personally equipped for the war. . . . This was a great stroke of luck, but an expensive one, and he did not know where to get the money necessary to keep up his position. He had arrived from the provinces without a penny. He tried to discover which way the wind was blowing, and although the royal favour had not, at that time, publicly pointed to Mme. de Montespan, he saw in her a future patroness. And as the Marquise on her part thought him clever, they joined forces.

It is seldom that kings form their opinions unaided. Lauzun, whose duties and the zeal with which he performed them brought him constantly in contact with Louis XIV, set about singing the praises of Athénaïs. On the strength of incessantly hearing her called the most seductive

woman in the kingdom by a clever man and a good critic, the King finished by believing it. He began to discover in her, beauties, which for five years he had failed to notice. His desires took fire, and, with the help of nocturnal proximity, they became ungovernable.

The palace was at rest. A great stillness had fallen over it. But the King did not sleep. He could not help remembering that, on the other side of the partition, lay a woman with white and voluptuous skin. . . . There would be no difficulty in sending away the sentinel who was watching at the door ; a word, a sign from him would be sufficient. But there was another obstacle : the apartment of the ladies-in-waiting was under the care of Mme. de Montausier.

Without being as strict as the Duchesse de Noailles, the new superintendent was an honest woman, the last of the survivors of the old Court which had witnessed the platonic liaisons of Louis XIII with Mlles. d'Hautefort and de La Fayette, and the King had to reckon with her modesty. It was not possible to imagine that she who, as Julie d'Angennes, had known the refinement of the Hôtel de Rambouillet, and for fifteen years had allowed herself to be worshipped before she consented to marry, would be party to a double adultery. She was a party, however, but without her knowledge. Mme. de Montespan took away the keys while she was asleep, and once

again Louis XIV witnessed the surrender of a place to which he had laid siege.

While the stay at Compiègne lasted, the King did not move from what he called " his garret." It was by turns the quarters of the general and the nest of love, and in these two were concentrated the forces which from that time forth animated his young heart : war which made him powerful, superb, and which was forging the brass buckle on which was to be inscribed the surname of " the great " ; and love in which he forgot his greatness to become the happy lover.

To the Queen, who was alarmed by having heard that he had been up very late the night before, he explained that a late courier had kept him at work. He told her that he had to read the despatches and reply to them, and his entourage were obliged to suppress their desire to laugh, for the secret of the royal nights was well known to all but the Queen. Her ideas were stationary, and she did not guess what was going on. She was too full of the joy of having, for the moment, kept away the rival of whom she persisted in being jealous—La Vallière, whom the King had raised to the rank of Duchess, whose child he had recognized, whose brother he had loaded with favours, and whose uncle he had appointed to the bishopric of Nantes. It was against her that Maria-Teresa turned all her dislike and her rage. At least, for the time being

there was nothing to fear from that quarter. Louise was a prisoner at Versailles, and the Queen gave herself up to the enjoyment of accompanying the King from town to town, of being with him in camp, and on the ramparts, and being presented to the conquered people as a charming pledge of alliance.

The Queen was at La Fère ; and was to rejoin the King the next day at Avesnes, when it became known that the Duchesse de La Vallière was on her way from Versailles, and that she would arrive that very evening. Nobody had sent for her and it seemed impossible to imagine that such a gentle, timid creature would dare to disobey a royal order. However, the news proved true. The exile could not bear the martyrdom of being far away any longer. A letter from the Abbé de Choisy, in which he related that the King had been in danger, had started this mad idea. "While the King was visiting the trenches," wrote the Abbé, "a bullet nearly struck him : 'Come away from there,' an old soldier cried out, catching him by the sleeve, 'this is no place for Your Majesty.'" Although these details had excited her admiration for his bravery, they had upset the love-sick woman. She conjured up in her imagination all the horrors and dangers of war. It seemed to her that a thousand dangers surrounded her beloved—and what would she do if any misfortune overtook him ! . . .

MLLE. DE MONTPENSIER

A few days later another courier brought the news of the victory of Lille, and although this allayed her fear of bullets, it strengthened her other anxieties: "This war was nothing more than an excuse for amusements and love intrigues. They behaved just as if it were a fête. The King had never been more gay, or more careful of his appearance. He spent his days with the ladies, and the evenings were devoted to balls and parties."

This decided Louise. She suffered too much. Her heart felt as if it would burst. In spite of her condition and the discomforts caused by it, she ordered her coach to be got ready at once. Her one desire was to cover as quickly as possible the distance that separated her from the lover who was forgetting her. Her sister-in-law, who loved her and who had a wise mind, tried to reason with her. She told her she would run the risk of displeasing the King. But Louise would listen to nothing. Whatever the disgrace that awaited her, nothing could hurt her more than the fact of being absent from the place where her fate was being decided.

The arrival of the Duchesse de La Vallière and her sister-in-law threw Maria-Teresa into a wild passion, followed by sickness. It seemed to her as if, all in a moment, her happiness had vanished. No longer able to curb her anger, the Queen gave orders to refuse dinner to the travellers. "But,"

add the chronicles, "the *maître-d'hôtel*, Villacerf, did not dare to carry out the order."

All this did not prevent the Duchesse and the Marquise de La Vallière from presenting their homage to the Queen. Admission to the chapel where mass was celebrated having been refused them, they waited outside, seated on a chest in the ante-chamber, until the Queen was entering her coach to rejoin the King, and then they went forward. It was their right, and their duty, and the armour of etiquette was so solidly linked together, that in spite of the feeling which agitated her, the Queen stopped and received their salutations.

She had no sooner got into the carriage than she gave free vent to her hatred, and her indignation against the impertinence of Louise in daring to come without knowing whether her presence would be welcome. With the cowardice of paltry creatures in the presence of greatness, the ladies who accompanied the Queen encouraged her in her anger.

"What a state Your Majesty is in," exclaimed the Princesse de Bade.

Mme. de Montausier was shocked. Mme. du Roure sympathized. But of all those present who pretended to be indignant at the insult offered to their sovereign, without a doubt Mme. de Montespan was the most treacherous.

"God save me from becoming the mistress of

the King," she said in a mild tone. "If ever such a thing were to happen, I should be ashamed to face the Queen."

On the road to Picardy, the coaches had to go in single file, that of the sovereign leading with the slow movement of a funeral procession. Express orders had been given that no one was to precede it. All at once, at a turning in the road, the green wooded heights of Avesnes came in sight, dotted here and there with the scarlet of the soldiers' uniforms. It was here that the royal camp was pitched. By the gold lace of his shoulder-strap the ladies recognized Louis. The glasses with which he was exploring the horizon shone like a diamond in the sun. La Vallière said to herself: "It is he!"

Her sweet, gentle soul was filled with joy. By a strange phenomenon she, who until then had been full of modesty and reserve, became all at once a fearless amazon. It is only given to those who love passionately to be several different women almost at the same time. The martyrdom of the heart alone can explain how at a given moment the will breaks away and allows acts to be accomplished which, under ordinary circumstances, would be impossible. Forgetting the orders, the proprieties, and that supreme respect which she always showed for the Queen, the mistress rushed forward. She called out to the postilion who drove her four horses to go at full speed, and

to reach the hill before anyone else. Her one desire was to see the King again, to be the first to fall at his feet and to whisper breathlessly : " Far from you I thought I was dying ! "

Maria-Teresa had noticed the coach that had dared to pass hers, and immediately gave orders that it should be stopped. But it was too late ! The horses that drew Louise were faster than those of the Queen. They cut across the fields, and at the risk of being upset scaled the hill first.

Once at her destination, Esther in the presence of Ahasuerus was not more pale than Louise, or more moved. Her legs scarcely supported her. Would his hand at least be stretched towards her ? No. The master before whom everyone trembled was frigid and stern.

" You, Madame," he said reproachfully, " before the Queen ! " And without another word he turned away.

Louise nearly fainted and pressed her hand to her heart. It seemed to her as if she had been dealt a mortal blow, and she was oppressed by the fear that perhaps Louis did not love her any more. Memories came back to her like sharp arrows. She remembered many occasions on which her loved one had already shown his indifference.

Her disgrace was not quite as complete as she imagined. Although the King had been annoyed

at seeing his old mistress when he was expecting the new, he had not yet reached the time when he openly preferred the one to the other, and he certainly did not desire to bring matters to a head. He was physically no longer attracted towards Louise, but he had an affectionate pity for her and he sincerely wanted to spare any pain to the woman who loved him with such a perfect love. He desired above all that she should not know the name of her rival. One day she would be obliged to submit to the inevitable, but for the moment Louis was eager to be careful and tactful. The very next day he set about repairing the evil that his rudeness had caused. Being naturally seductive, he had no difficulty in succeeding. A few kind words, a smile, a place beside him in the coach in which they drove to visit the Fort of Arras, and her tears were dried.

Louise's illusion, however, was not as complete as her lover would have wished. She loved too well, and with too much tenderness and jealousy, not to feel that Louis was not quite the same. If he came to see her, he was always in a hurry, excusing himself on the plea of work. But rather than face the dreadful fact, she attributed the change to other motives than the true one. She tried to believe that the passion for warfare had taken possession of him, and that he was now only really thrilled by the sound of cannons, saying

to herself: "If it is not I, no other woman could fill his mind."

In response to a sentiment, certainly less generous than the one which dictated the conduct of the sovereign, Athénaïs was in league with him in keeping La Vallière in ignorance of the real state of affairs. This answered the double purpose of acting as a blind with the Queen and allowing her to remain in her good graces, and of hiding her own infidelity from her husband. In both cases Louise would be useful as an alibi. As long as she was seen beside the King and he was observed to treat her in a lover-like fashion, no one could think that another had taken her place. From that time, Athénaïs' plans were laid. Towards her rival she pretended a friendship and a sincere comradeship. In public she preserved a ceremonious and discreet manner towards the King, and only spoke to him on the most harmless subjects. Seeing them thus, only the most evil-minded could imagine what was occurring.

In spite of these precautions, Louise saw through things at times. The understanding between Louis and Mme. de Montespan became evident to her, and she suspected them of being false and perfidious. Suspicions fell on her like a cloud of arrows. The next moment, however, her honest heart reproached her for accusing them without any proof. She began to wonder if she had really any grounds for her jealousy, and

though she was convinced in her heart that she had, she tried not to believe it. "After all," she argued, "what have I seen, what have I heard for certain?" And then for a few instants the image of her misery disappeared.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CLOUD SPREADS

LOUISE made a supreme effort, for a fortnight, to take part in the amusements of the war, and then returned to Versailles. She was at the end of her tether. The hurtful hostility of the Queen, who, at the King's orders, was obliged to have her with her in the coach, and who never either gave her a word or a look; the deceitful amiability of Athénaïs, the calculating coldness of the courtiers, who saw the decline of her power, were more than her shattered nerves could bear. When she had been at a distance her one desire was to be there, to see the truth with her own eyes, and work out her own destiny in some way rather than allow it to be accomplished without an effort on her part. This, she thought, would be preferable to absence, but experience taught her that she was wrong. The friends she had counted on failed her. Mme. de Montausier had turned in the direction of the rising star, and had forgotten her promises. D'Artigny, who owed it to Louise that she was created Comtesse du Roure, betrayed

their old friendship. She hardly saw the King. It was useless to persist, and her health was incapable of bearing the strain.

When he had got rid of his melancholy mistress, whose presence, in spite of the little notice he had taken of her, was a nuisance, Louis redoubled the pace. He went gaily from town to town with his numerous followers : about a thousand people in all, nobles, pages, valets, and scullions, without counting the escort. And as for luggage ! The things for use at the table alone, the silver plate, the candelabras, and the cooking utensils, took up as much room as an army. The King's bed, which is described as " very magnificent," the green velvet and gold-fringed furniture for his bedroom, were as splendid as those he used in his room at Versailles. And before all this, went the ladies in big gilded coaches, where they could chat and eat and continue their Court life. The King often accompanied them, as Van der Meulen shows us in top-boots, dressed in scarlet, galloping beside the coaches. Young faces smiled at him. He related his exploits, and, darting sly glances at the fair women that leaned towards him, he would risk some daring compliment. Louis was another man. Confidence in himself, which he had hitherto lacked, inspired his actions and broke down his reserve.

When meal-times came, he used to ask them to make room for him, and, seated on crimson

cushions, he would settle down between the Queen and Mme. de Montespan. They would open the big baskets which contained the food, and chickens, cold meats, pâtés, wines, pastries, and dessert were unceremoniously divided. Louis was not content with being a huge eater himself, but he insisted that the others should eat well also. He complimented the big eaters and regarded the others as affected. Here, at least, was something with which he could hardly reproach the plump Athénaïs. Her mouth laughed and at the same time her fine teeth devoured food. She was the joy of the journey. She invented all manner of stories to amuse the master. The little Flemish women, who were for the most part ugly and misshapen, would come and present bouquets to her. She imitated their awkwardness and their funny patois in "the most amusing manner in the world." Her wit spared no one, not even Maria-Teresa.

The Queen was the first to be amused by the sallies of her lady-in-waiting, and more than ever showed her every sign of friendship. It was impossible for her to mistrust anyone so full of gaiety. Besides, in serious moments, Athénaïs knew better than anybody how to keep her countenance. At the time of the last pilgrimage to Notre-Dame de Liesse she was seen to go to Communion, and no one was more assiduous in her visits to churches, hospitals, and orphanages.

The Queen's confidence, however, was put to a very severe test. It was a few days after the departure of La Vallière. Maria-Teresa was enjoying the peace of mind of having driven away the only rival she feared. She was now sure she would have the King all to herself. An anonymous letter reached her, in which the Marquise's treachery was denounced in plain words. With many details, the writer of the letter related the incidents of the night at Compiègne, the planned proximity of the rooms, and pointed out Mme. de Montausier as an accomplice. Instead of making personal inquiries that might have resulted in opening her eyes, she showed the letter to the two ladies whose names were implicated. Both of them, needless to say, protested their innocence, and denounced the monstrous calumny. Mme. de Montausier was perhaps sincere . . . as for Athénaïs, nothing could surpass her expressions of indignation : " To accuse her of such ingratitude ! After all the kindness she had received at the hands of the Queen ! "

Such proofs only suffice when the accuser is already prejudiced in one's favour. This was the case with Maria-Teresa. Turning to Mlle. de Montpensier, who relates the scene, she declared :

" I don't believe a word of all this ! "

Mademoiselle, with the prudence of one who has had enough of her own troubles, and had

quite made up her mind not to mix herself up in those of royal personages, at once agreed.

"Your Majesty is quite right."

From that time the Queen redoubled her confidence. She was full of kindness and forethought for her lady-in-waiting, whom she loaded with gifts on every occasion. She had no suspicion, and Mme. de Montespan's audacity increased daily. Under the very eyes of the blinded Queen she took liberties which were quite unprecedented. She even went so far as to make up a game of cards in which the picture cards represented certain persons of the Court, and she mixed them up in such a way as to bring about the most compromising situations, which were very amusing for those who were in the secret.

While he was amused at the jokes of his mistress, Louis XIV, who was always careful of his kingly dignity, tried to discover who had been indiscreet enough to interfere in his private affairs. Determined to punish, he gave orders for an inquiry. "Who had made the Queen uneasy?" And as Athénaïs was the interested party, the inquiry was made without delay. Suspicion fell on the Princesse de Bade. There was nothing that could clearly establish this lady's guilt, except that she was witty, pretty, and ambitious. . . . This was more than enough to make her pay the penalty, and a decree of exile was signed against her.

Thus began the reign of the arbitrator who replaced the gentle influence of Louise, and who brought down that venomous and smouldering hatred of royalty which, in later years, burst forth so terribly.

The capitulation of Lille completed the easy conquests of Louis XIV, and he suddenly felt a great desire for rest, or rather the desire which overtakes conquerors who have been drawn far from home, to return and enjoy their triumph, and breathe the incense that the people burn in their honour. The King was received like a hero by the nation. Cheers greeted him everywhere. Te Deums were sung and fireworks let off. And yet nothing had been definitely settled ; Tournay and Douai still resisted, and Franche-Comté remained to be conquered. However, Turenne had promised to look after the frontier, and the King was able without scruples to give himself the delights of repose.

The rebuilding of Versailles was at that time being carried out, and no royal residence was more fitted to spend an agreeable autumn in than the château of Saint-Germain.

It was during a fête in which La Vallière was taking part, not as she had done in the past, like a queen in disguise, but with all the pomp of her new rank, that for the fourth time she was seized with the pains of childbirth. From the fact that her last maternity was divulged and glorified,

we must not conclude that this time she was any less anxious to hide what was happening. Louise was still modest, and, added to the shame of being an illegitimate mother, there was now another shame. This child, conceived in the pangs of parting, and carried in the midst of her tears and abandonment, seemed like charity received at the hands of her lover. More than ever, the young woman determined to hide her condition. When the time came, she gave birth to her child at the Hôtel Brion, with as much secrecy as at Vincennes. It was born on a Saturday night while the usual midnight party was in progress, and no one, not even the father, suspected. Louis XIV's scorn for his son is almost beyond all belief. When he heard of its birth he behaved as if he knew nothing about it. It seemed as if he wished to punish the innocent child for the mother's sin in being no longer loved. Two years later, he decided to recognize the child and give it a title and a name. He made him the Comte de Vermandois.

Louise might, at least, have been allowed to keep this son, born of her tears, as a token of consolation, that when she kissed its little head she might forget the pain of being abandoned. From this she might have learned the lesson of resignation, taught to so many mothers by their children. But the master, who arranged everything, decided that this time also she was to

remain a childless mother. Little Louis belonged to her no more than Mlle. de Blois. Her attendants took him away, and when the Duchess wanted to kiss her children and watch their pretty ways she had to go to Mme. Colbert, who was their guardian. " Mademoiselle et Monsieur l'Amiral " were the names by which her children were known to her ; and they called her " belle maman," and bowed ceremoniously before her. How stiff and unnatural it all sounds !

It cannot be true that Court etiquette demanded such a sacrifice, or that people in those days were not effusive, or that maternal love was not born in the hearts of the seventeenth century. Proof to the contrary is not lacking in the writings of the time, notably in the passionate correspondence which was exchanged between Mme. de Sevigné and her daughter, Mme. de Grignan : " You are everything to me, my dear child, there is no one else but you," and, " It is my delight to see you, to speak to you, to hear your voice." And again : " I have given up my life to one occupation only, that is, to all the joy, to all the pain, to all the pleasure, and all the anxiety that this love may bring to me." There is nothing that can hold back the flood of maternal love. Louise's feeling for her children was devoid of any great love. It may have been that the whole strength of her heart had been given to her lover, who had so entirely invaded her soul that there was no

room left for anyone else ; or it may be that the circumstances under which she had become a mother prevented her feeling as other women feel. At any rate, she has left behind no evidence that she ever felt any deep maternal love. There was only one fire that burnt in her breast. The lover who had been the joy of her life, and who had become her executioner, possessed all her thoughts ; he compelled them, obsessed them, and martyrized them until the day when, tired out, this woman with her profound feelings turned towards God, who alone was able to console her for the loss of the heart of the King.

In the meanwhile, her life intermingled with that of her rival. The will of the master, as well as their mutual jealousy, forced them to be constantly together. At one time it was the woman with her many ways of pleasing who gained ground, at another the woman with her tearful love. The attentions that the King showed to La Vallière, and those that he insisted should be shown her, and the many times that he went back to her, sometimes in all sincerity, made the courtiers hesitate. They could not understand what it all meant, and they asked themselves who was the conqueror, and were confused as to how to regulate their designing actions. Those who opposed Louise most vigorously, and who, in all their intrigues, placed themselves at the service of her rival, soon began to see that they

THE CHÂTEAU OF VERSAILLES

From the collection of A. M. Broadley

had lost by the exchange. "What a difference," says Mme. de Sevigné in one of her sincere moments, "between the beautiful Montespan and the little violet who hides herself under the grass, who is ashamed of being a mistress, of being a mother, and of being a duchess! We shall never see her like again."

The King himself, in the course of the many scenes that his new mistress made with him, must have regretted her who always bowed down before him. But it was Athénaïs by whom he was carried away. For ten years all felt the weight of the yoke imposed by her harsh disposition. A stranger to modesty or to the fear of hurting, the new idol was guilty, in her triumph, of countless indiscreet demands—La Vallière had asked nothing. Luxury was the Montespan's natural element; gambling her favourite amusement. She lost impossible sums of money, sometimes as much as one thousand crowns on the turn of a card. She won as much as fifty thousand pistoles at the game of "basset" (about seven million francs), only to lose it again the same night. Popular feeling was gradually stirred by the money that was being squandered, and a woman who had seen her son perish in the works at Versailles, raised her hand against the King.

A kind of tacit etiquette was established in favour of the Marquise, and she was placed above the rank of a duchess, and made almost an

equal of the Queen. The privileges which she claimed were such that Saint-Simon, who only knew her after she was disgraced and had retired to a convent where she was supposed to atone for her sins, was astonished to discover what had taken place. "She never," he said, "returned a visit, even from Monsieur or Madame, or Mademoiselle, or from the Hôtel Condé. She received in the same haughty manner. There was no other arm-chair in her room but her own, not even for the princes and princesses." This affected ceremony, this luxury, this usurped etiquette, created much more scandal than that the King, still young and with the susceptibility of youth, should have yielded to temptation.

The Montespan was a little anxious before she actually arrived at the point when she believed she had nothing to fear and no one to envy. Incapable of any real love herself, she doubted the love she inspired. Her victory still seemed uncertain. The King's behaviour was a constant source of apprehension to her. She began to wonder if, after all, the feeling that this sensualist had for her was only a caprice, for the woman who had occupied his whole heart for seven years was still at Court, and he would not make up his mind to abandon her entirely. She did not understand the feeling which made friendship succeed love, and she was annoyed at the vacillations which now brought Louis to her and now

sent him back to the arms of La Vallière. He did not hide his inconstancy and she was anxious that there should be a public rupture. Because she could not obtain her rival's disgrace she became venomous. She felt she must rid herself of La Vallière at any price. The difficulty was that the King did not wish to be cruel, and to give a formal and positive proof of his preference. In order to force him to this line of action, the illustrious daughter of the Mortemarts secretly consulted Catherine Voison, and the sorceress once again brought all her powers into play. The infamous priestess, Marietta, assumed the sacred vestments; blood flowed; love potions were concocted. The name of the hated rival mingled with the incantations. . . .

While her enemy was thus engaged against her, Louise was suffering intense misery at being thrown out of the Eden where she had hoped to remain for ever. But she did not believe that the change in the King would last. She took as proof of this the sudden emotions which after long periods of coldness brought Louis back to her, and with this thought she consoled her aching heart. Words heard in hours of happiness and repeated by faithless lips still have a ring of truth. No one can tell how long it will take a tree to die when it has lost its leaves. In her happier moods, she thought that though perhaps the King had not the same passionate feeling towards

her he still loved her and was full of tenderness and affection towards her, and like us all, she was anxious to clutch at a mistake that was dear to her and eagerly accepted generosity for love. Sometimes she saw things more clearly, and it was then that her soul was plunged in inexpressible misery. She felt herself alone, deserted in the midst of the universe. She suffered so acutely that she began to regret the day she had learned to love. Her remorse hid her memories from her. She asked herself how she came to lose her honour, and how she could have made herself such a sad object of scandal. One pang had until then been spared her. She did not believe that her rival entirely possessed Louis' heart. She thought that Athénaïs' beauty had, for the moment, dazzled him ; that her coquetry amused him and that he was attracted by her mind ; but that he had the same feelings towards her rival that he had for her seemed beyond all possibility. The character of the Marquise was her guarantee. It seemed impossible that the King could feel anything like a deep and real love for a woman not worthy of his esteem. She needed public evidence to make her believe that such a thing could be. She, like the Queen, required official proof to convince her.

Benserade was not responsible for this double cruelty ; his slight and inoffensive talent lacked the fullness necessary for great enterprises. It

was left to Molière, the powerful servant, the satirist, as harsh to himself as he was to the breed of the Court. We can discredit the fact that *Amphitryon* was written, as has been suggested, at the instigation of Louis XIV; but there is no doubt that the author would not have dared to risk the allusions with which the text bristles from end to end unless he had been assured that they would be approved. It may be added that the work was in all probability encouraged by the woman who, far from wishing, as La Vallière had done, to hide her sin, was proud of it and exposed it as a trophy. Too much of an artist to confine himself by realism, Molière invented a mythological fantasy, which, at necessity, he could say he had borrowed from Plato, but to those who knew, the names of Jupiter and Alcmene were exactly suited to those of the King and Mme. de Montespan. Amphitryon was the husband, and Sosie, Molière himself, who, not being able to give vent to his conjugal unhappiness, appeared for once in the rôle of a philosopher, having left it to the other husband in the play to undertake the comic jealous husband.

All that was left to M. de Montespan was to shut his eyes and appear not to understand. In this, Molière was careful to flatter his vanity and represent him as the brave and heroic conqueror of the Thebans. If, in the absence of the husband, the wife had betrayed the conjugal

trust, it was by means of a subterfuge, a huge joke on the part of a god. Did not Jupiter assume the features of Amphitryon in the eyes of Alcmene and actually impersonate him ? The play finishes with this conclusion :—

Un partage avec Jupiter
N'a rien du tout qui déshonore,
Et, sans doute, il n'est que glorieux
De se voir rival du souverain des dieux.

(There is nothing dishonourable in sharing with Jupiter, and without doubt, it is glorious to find oneself a rival of the monarch of the gods.)

Misconstrued in this way, the adultery became acceptable, and M. de Montespan himself heard the reading of *Amphitryon* by the author, without finding anything objectionable. The piece was played at the Palais Royal on the 13th of January, 1668, and two days later, at the Tuileries, in the presence of the King and the entire Court. Never had Molière's gracious style shown itself to greater advantage.

If M. de Montespan had identified himself with the great general who was competing with Jupiter, it is most probable he would have taken the wise counsel of Sosie :—

Sur des telles affaires, toujours
Le meilleur est de ne rien dire.

(In affairs of this kind it is always best to say nothing.)

But during the week at Versailles when the fêtes, which were given four years before for La

Vallière, were renewed in honour of his wife, the jealousy of M. de Montespan was given a thousand reasons to be aroused. Whether she was beside the King at table or in his coach, the Marquise assumed the rights of a favourite, and the circulation of the verses we have already cited, and many others equally full of significance, made the husband feel that he was cast off, fooled, and ridiculed. The performance of *Georges Dandin*, where this time he recognized himself under the disguise of a peasant married to the daughter of a country squire, added the last straw to M. de Montespan's fury. Forgetting the promises made by Jupiter to Amphitryon of "a fortune fertile of all good things," he made a terrible scene.

The chronicles of the period are full of details about him, in which he is represented as a madman, a fool who declaimed in the ante-chambers and talked to the courtiers of his misfortune, and who composed daring harangues which he offered in the presence of the King. But nothing equalled the scandal of which Saint-Germain was the scene. Not without reason, Mme. de Montausier was suspected by the Marquis. It had been said that she had facilitated the meeting at Compiègne. The Marquis broke into the superintendent's apartments when she was in bed, and made a scene which so upset that old prude that she had an attack of fever, and her death a short time after may well be attributed to the violence of her

feelings. Trembling and hardly able to speak, she gave the following account of the affair : " M. de Montespan came into my room like a fury and raved against his wife, and addressed the most insolent remarks to me. I thanked God that only my women were present, for if there had been anyone else, I think they would have thrown him out of the window." On two different occasions Saint-Simon refers to this same adventure, which has received the most realistic details from his pen. " M. de Montespan," says he, " was all the more enraged because he could not hide the fact that he was in a way responsible for his great misfortune, and having lost all control over himself on account of the love he bore his wife, he led her such a life that she did not feel safe at Saint-Germain, and the King put her in the charge of Mme. de Montausier. M. de Montespan became more angry at this and set about looking for trouble with the same care that one usually avoids it. The King was warned, and ordered Mme. de Montausier to redouble her precautions. In spite of all, M. de Montespan managed to reach his wife ; but as soon as she set eyes on him she began to scream and ran for protection into the arms of Mme. de Montausier. There was a terrible scene. He did not care what he said. There were no filthy or atrocious insults which he did not throw in the face of Mme. de Montausier with the most violent reproaches.

They both had recourse to wild cries which brought servants to their assistance, and then the same insults were repeated until he was taken forcibly away, but not without a vigorous resistance or before he had succeeded in putting the two ladies into the most mortal terror."

Such a scandal could not be hushed up. At the terrified request of the Marquise the King had her husband taken to Fort-Evêque, and with his own hands he sent an order to the Châtelet to draw up a legal separation between the Montespans. This having been done they could not keep the prisoner under lock and key any longer; but as there was always some new prank to fear from him, he was sent under escort to his château of Guyenne. His stay in prison, the calming air of the provinces, the stamped deed with which the lawyers overwhelmed him, seemed to have made their fears groundless. But this was not so, at any rate, not for some time. Before allowing himself to be forgotten he made one last effort, no less eccentric than the others. Dressed all in black and accompanied by his two children, whom he had taken with him in his exile, he invited all the country-side to be present at the funeral of his wife. For him and for his sons the Marquise was dead and worse than dead; her name was effaced from the archives of the family. Though it was in rather bad taste, this Gasconade still demands a certain amount of respect. At

any rate, it gives the lie to those who have tried to insinuate that the Marquis would have been quite ready to exploit his wife's good fortune for his own benefit had he been given the chance.

At first La Montespan was moved, and while her tormentor was still at large, a little anxious for fear his behaviour might compromise her interests, but afterwards she made fun of the whole affair. "I am ashamed that my husband should vie with my parrot in amusing the crowds." It is impossible to know whether she was really laughing or whether she ever thought of her children, who had remained in the hands of the man whom she had mocked, and who had taught them to believe that they had no mother. In any case, if her peace of mind was disturbed with remorse, Athénaïs concealed it very cleverly. Nobody in their prosperity ever behaved in a more arrogant fashion. She flaunted her glories, but failed to charm anyone. She was full of greed, and ambition, and caprice, but no real love, none of that blushing weakness which wins affection and asks forgiveness. An incomparable, carnal splendour, an inextinguishable laugh, a richness of blood which rendered the use of rouge on her cheeks unnecessary, all added to the scandal rather than excused it. The opulence of her arms and her hair, full of precious stones, seemed to court admiration rather than love. But as she was, the King idolized his new mistress and the

Court was at her feet. It is true that no one was more amusing than she; no one knew better how to act the great lady. Her wit had a style of its own—it was at once refined, bantering, eloquent, and audacious in the choice of words. She had taste. She gave her patronage to Lulli and encouraged Racine and Quinault. The fêtes she organized were distinctive. The censor of flattery was stirred up around her. She was called "La Merveille," "L'Incomparable," "La Belle Madame," "Quanto," as Mme. de Sevigné in a word summed up her perfections. If, on the one hand, the character of Mme. de Montespan inspired but little sympathy, she benefited by the consideration that attached to the great favour she enjoyed, the luxury, and above all, the power she could exercise to ruin those who offended her. Her credit was boundless, but she seldom used it to help others. The little help she gave was less with the idea of making friends than to convey to the men in power the impression that they could not do without her support.

In the face of all this, Maria-Teresa could no longer remain in ignorance. On her knees on the cushions of her private chapel she poured out her grief in pious misery. Interminable colloquies and tears took place between God and herself; but the model wife never complained to her lord. Besides, her light disposition saved her from thinking constantly of her misfortunes. Dogs,

buffoons, gaily coloured ribbons, sufficed to distract her. Always a child, she was never happier than when Molina related her stories in Spanish, or brought her oranges from her own country.

The real victim, the victim cut to the quick, was La Vallière. Though until the performance of *Amphitryon* Louise had been able to blind herself to facts, and persist in refusing to believe what was evident to everybody else, she could now no longer doubt. No enlightenment, no allusion had been spared her. Even the very date of her betrayal was made known. She knew that before the departure for Flanders the King had already made advances to Mme. de Montespan ; she knew that the night at Compiègne had consummated the infidelity. Not only did she know that she was no longer dear to the King, as she had hoped always to be, but she knew that Louis' love, her one and supreme joy, had been taken from her by a woman who had possessed all the things she had never known : family, children, husband, and who above all had pretended to be her friend.

Hearts that have suffered know the immeasurable distance that exists between fears that are founded on the best authority and absolute certainty. She did not content herself with dumb protestations. Her love was too tenacious to accept a decree which, after all, she had not heard. So long as her beloved had not spoken it,

she did not lose all hope. Perhaps his estrangement was only temporary, perhaps all was not lost. . . . Tired out at last by the uncertainty, she decided on a plan of action. Cost what it might to her pride and her fears, she made up her mind to go to the King and put him the question quite frankly, and ask him if he had ceased to love her. She was quite determined to carry out her resolution and she only awaited an opportune moment. But the King seemed to have a presentiment and suspected her plan. If he saw her in the distance he turned away his eyes. He refused to meet the beseeching glance that sought his so persistently. But Louise would speak to the King!

On what day and in what place she carried out her design her memoirs do not relate. Only the essence of the dialogue that took place between them has been handed down to us, and from the dry sincerity of some of the words and the tender submission of others, it is easy to reconstruct the agonizing interview. Louise made her complaint in a low voice. Embarrassed, rather than moved, Louis looked at her coldly. When a man has ceased to love, the deplorable sight of his ex-mistress is no more to him than a troublesome phantom. If only he had had the kindness to lie! . . . But deception was too far removed from the King's temperament and he never took the trouble to deny his infidelity. He chose the

easy means of sincerity, which is so ungenerous on the part of the guilty when they have nothing to fear from their judges.

"Well, then, it is true. I love Mme. de Montespan."

In love only the duty towards the loved one is recognized. The Marquise had bewitched him; she had made him promise to end the matter, to leave no hope to the rival whose pretty face and sweet, tender love always seemed a danger to her.

Once the blow had been struck, as if to soften the consequences of it, the King reminded her of the advantages of his friendship. He said he would always have for Louise feelings "of which she would have no cause to complain."

These promises only aggravated the inconsolable pain. A heart such as hers, destined to her dying day to burn only with one passion, could not understand by what sad mystery others could be so different. She felt suffocated and could not restrain her tears.

The faithless lover grew impatient. He declared with an air of authority that if Louise wished to remain in his good graces she must ask nothing of him but that which he chose to give.

And what was he offering her? What was he going to suggest? . . . That she should remain at Court, that she should live surrounded with honours, that she should continue the equal and companion of Athénaïs. Louise could not agree

to such a prospect. Her pride would not allow her to accept it. For her, neither honours nor rank counted for anything. What her aching heart wanted was the heart alone of Louis ; it was him alone, the lover whom she adored ! Rather than live without his love she preferred to go far away. She begged that as he no longer loved her he would spare her at least the sight of her rival and allow her to retire to a convent. She asked why he had not left her alone the day when she had gone to find shelter there. She regretted not having listened to the warning of the Mother-Superior when she pointed out the fate that awaited her soul.

But the master's mind was made up. He had his reasons for not wishing Louise to go away. In spite of the fact that he was banished to his estates, and that a deed of separation had been drawn up between himself and his wife, in spite, too, of the solemn ceremony with which he had buried her, the Marquis de Montespan still remained a danger. There was no certainty as to what, at any time, might be expected of him. The wisest thing was to humour him, and it was decided that to all outward appearances nothing should be changed in the King's way of living. Public opinion should continue to hesitate between the two favourites, and in order that an enraged and proud husband should be given no pretext for interference, a six years' martyrdom

was to be imposed on one of the most sensitive creatures that ever lived.

La Vallière was for the future dragged behind the chariot of her rival. She was obliged to follow her without any outward signs of revolt along the road of her own happiness. By this road to Calvary her passion began gently and imperceptibly to be purified, as she herself verifies. Little by little her soul arrived at those feelings of penitence which have made of her the most touching of Magdalenes. Every day the work of expiation was carried out, and she glided down an irresistible slope towards the mystic stream from which her soul had been turned away. Louise abandoned herself to it entirely. She began to regain those religious feelings which had been the poetry of her infancy, and which became the uplifting and the serenity of her future. Her natural predisposition, aided by her will, led her to the indefinable border-line where human love is purified, transfigured, and lost in divine love. But before she arrived at this point she advanced many times and was thrown back again! Sometimes she was assailed by the temptation of her desire to be taken back by her lover; she would stretch out her longing arms and call to him, and suffer tortures when he did not reply. At other times, ashamed and appalled at herself, and her weakness, she gave way to wild contrition and went back to the dreadful torment

LOUISE DE LA VALLIÈRE

From an old print, photographed by kind permission of Messrs. Maggs Bros.

of trying to crush her heart and accustom it to insensibility.

A sonnet that she dedicated to the King at the time reveals the state of her soul :—

> Vous m'aimiez autrefois, mais vous ne m'aimez plus.
> Mes sentiments, hélas ! . . . different des vôtres ! . . .
> Amour à qui je dois et mon mal et mon bien,
> Que ne lui donniez-vous un cœur comme le mien
> Ou, que n'avez-vous fait le mien comme les autres ! . .

Obedient to the instructions, the two favourites never left each other. While the one worked out her cruel apprenticeship, the other amused herself by humiliating her. Abusing the advantage she held, Mme. de Montespan condemned La Vallière to be present at all the fêtes, card parties, and suppers at which she triumphed. In the presence of the victim who was being sacrificed she pretended to laugh and whisper in the King's ear words that seemed like kisses. She made her help her dress as if she had been a servant. Her head-dress never satisfied her unless the sufferer had strewn it with her tears. A picture of the period shows them together in the Park at Versailles : the Duchesse is attaching a garland of roses to the Marquise's skirt. Their expressive faces are eloquent of the servitude of the one and the mocking cruelty of the other.

If we may believe what, with her Tudoresque frankness, the mother of the Regent relates, the King himself treated the woman he had adored

with unbelievable harshness. After a scene between them, when Louise in despair had tried to restrain him, Louis was irritated to the point of forgetting the courtesy of which he was usually a model. Getting up brusquely from the sofa on which they were seated, he threw a little spaniel named Malice, which had climbed on his knees, on to his ex-mistress's lap, saying: "Here, Madame, is fit company for you."

It has often been wondered how La Vallière could have allowed herself to play, day after day, the part of the dethroned queen, and to have suffered the humiliations by which her dignity was hourly torn into shreds, and she has been severely criticized for her complaisance. Certainly we should prefer a heroine to have shown more energy and more rebellion, or even to have resolutely left the Court, for no authority, even though it were royal, could have kept her there had she had the courage to leave. But great love and dignity seldom go together. If Louise drank of the bitter cup, and if at times she seemed to drink it with a kind of voluptuous pleasure, it was because she preferred bitterness to thirst. With all she endured, there was a far worse prospect: to live far from the King. She could not imagine a more cruel or more intolerable torment than to be separated entirely from him. Although she was deserted, she still wished to remain in the house where her joy had lived.

She preferred the atrocious contact of her happy rival to absence from her lover, the gift of herself without end, the love that suffered rather than abdicate. She explained herself, in a reply she sent to Père César, an old Carmelite, who, from the monastery to which he was gradually leading her, had felt it his duty to endeavour to moderate the fever of her penitence : " It is not the sackcloth that is killing me ; it is not that which takes away my sleep and rest : it is my remorse. It is, above all, the mean-spirited desire to add to my remorse. Do I not see them daily ? Am I not seated face to face with my rival—he at her side, and far from me ? Have I not seen ? Have I not heard ? I do not know what hell is ; but I cannot imagine a hell more terrible than that in which my heart lives and suffers, and where it remains nevertheless, where, in a way, it finds solace, for never to see him would be a hell which I could not bear ! "

An event which Louise had not taken into consideration was added to her sufferings. Towards the month of March, 1669, Mme. de Montespan gave birth to a child. Though this fact was kept secret from the whole Court, an exception was made in the case of Louise. Why ? What was it they expected of her ? Even in her wildest imagination she had not guessed the reason. This child who was born in a room adjoining hers, and taken away in the night as hers had been,

could quite easily have been attributed to her, and that is what the King had decided. Just as the Court had found an ambiguous and useful name for the two mistresses and spoke of his "going to see the ladies," or of his "returning from visiting the ladies," without alluding any more to the one than to the other, it was necessary that the child should also come from "the ladies," without it being officially known which was the mother. In this way it was hoped to avoid any further complications with the legal father, the Marquis de Montespan.

And the modest creature, who had exposed herself to death itself rather than own her motherhood, bowed her head without a word. She felt it was only right that she should expiate her sin. Besides, Louise had sworn to submit herself in all things to the King's will, and against that will she would never revolt. It was in this way that her heroic soul wished to prove that she still loved, although her love was wanted no longer. She found a kind of sweet torture in her privations, and in her daily sacrifice and in this harsh sensuality she tried to satisfy her longing for happiness. Anyway, they did not take advantage of her to the extent of placing her rival's child in her care after having deprived her of her own. The person who consented to undertake for the new-born child the part played in the past by Mme. Colbert was an intelligent and beautiful

woman, who, by reason of her misfortunes, her well-balanced mind, and the obligation forced on her by her poverty to bow down before the great, was eminently suitable for the post of governess. Françoise d'Aubigné had recently been left a widow by the death of her husband, Scarron, the poet, and once again found herself in the extreme poverty from which her marriage had saved her. But though Mme. Scarron had been left without a penny, many people who used to frequent the house of the amusing and clever cripple remained her friends. It was to the most powerful of these, the Maréchal d'Albret, that she owed her introduction to Mme. de Montespan. The post that she held at first with the Marquise was a very humble one, and Saint-Simon shows us this seductive creature "engaged in every sort of work, sometimes being sent to fetch wood for the fire, or to ask if dinner would soon be ready; at another time to ask if the carriage had returned; and to do a thousand other little commissions which the use of bells have made unnecessary."

From performing such menial duties, the clever widow rose to the astonishing fortune which, in fifteen years, was to lead her from the antechambers of the Hôtel Richelieu to become the legitimate wife of Louis XIV. When she received the post of governess to the new child, who afterwards became the Duc de Maine, she was given a house in the Marais with a huge garden, horses,

servants, and a sufficient income to keep them up. In exchange the most profound secrecy was demanded of her. She was to live alone and not to allow anyone into the mysterious domain.

The Parisians, then as now, were too inclined to occupy themselves with what did not concern them to remain long in ignorance of anything that they were not supposed to know. The birth of this new bastard was suspected, and the news was hawked from pillar to post. But the public did not go any further than wondering which of "the ladies" had brought it into the world. This was exactly what was wanted.

CHAPTER IX

CALVARY

WHEN we look back on the crowded days of which we have followed the course, it might easily be supposed that they occupied a long time. We are almost tempted to ask what more she who had lived them wanted of life, and whether she had not reached the time allotted by fate to each of us. But this was not the fact. In 1668, La Vallière was entering her twenty-fifth year. Contemporaries are all in accord in saying that her beauty was never more complete, or had more fully retained the characteristic fragility which made her so appealing. Whatever else Louise may have been, she was not unreasonable. After the period of the first shock, her rebellion against fate and her endless tears, she faced the prospect before her. The perspective appeared to be shut off, and the horizon darkened. The courage of her race, however, was aroused in her. Rather than give in, as she had decided to do in her first moments of despair, she determined to make a fight. She would do all in her power to win back

that which was perhaps, after all, not irretrievably lost.

From the very beginning Louise had been fond of dress. There was not one of the ladies-in-waiting who possessed to the same extent the womanly art of knowing how to put on her clothes, or was so well able to make a framework for her prettiness out of nothing. At that time a simple muslin, a ribbon entwined in her hair, was sufficient to make her the peer of the most ostentatious of women. She, like La Montespan, had now to have a gorgeous and varied wardrobe, if she was to eclipse her or even for one night appear more beautiful in the eyes of the King. From that moment the Duchesse spared no pains. From being a pastime and an amusement, dress became one of the thrusts in the duel for happiness. Her elegance was even noticed in a Court where magnificence was the essential characteristic. She made full use of the revenues from her domain of Vaujours and even sometimes exceeded them. Louise spent without counting the cost. Her wardrobes were loaded with the richest brocades ; her head-dresses were wonderful ; she bought the diamonds that the Duchesse de Mazarin had abandoned in her flight. The furniture of her hotel was luxurious in the extreme. One of the cabinets alone contained as many as a hundred and forty mirrors. Louise of Touraine, the modest daughter of the hills, can hardly be

recognized amid the velvet and the gilt of the portrait by Mignard, now in England. But it is Louise, degraded into a mere dressed-up puppet, eager for battle in the armour of coquetry.

Although she resorted to elegance to assist her in the hard fight she was waging, Louise was much too clever to neglect the adornment of her mind. She was attracted to the fashionable philosophers, not as her enemies were to sorcerers and magicians, whose hideous trafficking offended her temperament, and she set herself to study. Work is always the most powerful balm for a weary soul. Perhaps the ingenious doctrines of Gassendi exercised a pernicious influence on her bewildered mind; perhaps they succeeded in persuading her to persist in her epicureanism without dignity. But an archangel was watching over her. He would not allow the flame which heaven had placed in his charge to be extinguished. A sudden illness prostrated Louise. In a few hours she was in peril of death. She had sense enough left to see the wing of Death hovering over her bed. She felt all the remorse, all the terror of believers who have lived in sin. "Like a criminal on the scaffold," she related a little while after, "I could do nothing more for my salvation. I was waiting, almost anxiously, for my punishment."

The hour, however, had not yet come. Louise returned to life. She was again to see the light

of day; she was again to breathe the scent of spring mornings; she was again to be beautiful and gracious; she was only twenty-six. . . . But her soul would be changed. New feelings surged up in her like stones when the soil is turned over. The ex-mistress, the Princess of Love, the Nymph of the Enchanted Island, gave herself up entirely to the expiation of what she called "the enormities of her crime." She gave up the luxury, the false glitter which had deceived her. Everything appeared to her at its true value, exactly as she had judged at the moment when Death had made all things clear. She remembered the days that had passed with remorse and desolation. She longed to make sacrifices that would purify her heart, and make it acceptable to God. "Is it not just that I should give Thee evidence of my repentance by banishing from myself the causes by which I have so greatly displeased Thee?"

However strong and sincere the resolutions, it is impossible to tear from the heart in a day a sentiment which for six years has been its strength and joy. The "demi-penitente," as she called herself, was constantly drawn back towards the dear sin. These relapses frightened her. She distrusted a breath, a scent, a note of music, the thousand demons that danced round her heart. To escape from them she shut her eyes and her ears. She forced herself only to be conscious of the disdain with which the King overwhelmed

her. Renouncing her tolerance, she carefully re-examined her sins. . . . She reopened the wounds that her lover had given her, and asked herself why it was so difficult to break away from a man by whom she had been treated so cruelly. Her own strength, however, was not sufficient to bring about the rupture. She prayed for help: "Do not allow me, O My God, to be too sure of my safety! Do not allow me to flatter myself that I am dead to a passion that I feel lives in me more dangerously than ever! Save me from the sweet poison of pleasing and of loving!"

Although slow, Louise's conversion went forward surely and sincerely. She marked the stages in a little book which is a kind of secret conversation between her soul and God. This work, the authenticity of which admits of no doubt, was preserved, under the title of *Réflexions sur La Miséricorde de Dieu*, by a friend to whom Louise had entrusted it before entering the Carmel; "in order," says this pious lady, "that the faithful may not be deprived of an example which will be useful to those who wish to do penance." It would be impossible to read anything more touching than this affecting colloquy between the sinner and the God she has sinned against. Sometimes she speaks to Him as to a friend whose pardon she implores, sometimes again as to a loved one whose love inflames her. In the first place she thanks Him for having

brought her back to life, for having fulfilled in her His design of forgiveness by allowing her time for her conversion. She begs Him to teach her the way : " Teach me that the kind of life I have been leading is not Christian, and that a God did not make Himself incarnate, and die, so that we should live according to the senses and the flesh." And again : " At the same time, O My God, as Thou uprooteth the bad habits of my soul, plant there virtues that will make the work of my salvation fruitful." Then she confesses : " I write these words with my own hands, as a record, O My God, of Thy mercies towards me, so that I may read day by day the decree of my eternal reproach if I again abuse Thy goodness to me, and as a guarantee of my salvation and the eternal joy in Thee, if I remain faithful."

But no one can remain safe at the doors of temptation. A thousand outward attractions continued to appeal to the ex-mistress. Sparks of still unextinguished passion burst from her. She was exhausted by the struggle. At moments she felt she was lost. " I am a poor brute without honour, without a mind, and without sense." What was the cause of these fallings back, and of the burden under which she felt she could never rise ? A look was enough, alas ! a glance from the man she loved. Louise still admired him. She was surrounded, bewildered, obsessed by the fascination that he exercised

over her. She could not tear herself away from him ; he had still the power, by a gesture, to bring all her hopes back to life. If he showed himself more amiable than usual, or if he spoke to her words by which it pleased him to exercise his dangerous seduction, she felt that the whole thing was going to begin over again. Like the Canaanite, to whom she loved to compare herself, humbly, ignominiously, Louise felt she was ready to gather up the crumbs of the feast. Her virtue was at the mercy of a caprice, of the passing repentance, and nothing more, that Louis, from time to time, expressed. If he stretched out his arms to her for a moment, arms that would be closed to her again as soon as his desire was satisfied, she lost her head and flung herself into them as into an abyss. " How weak and vacillating I am ! " she bemoans on the paper which served as her confidant. " My best resolutions are like the flower which the prophet speaks of, which blooms in the morning, and at night is withered."

She steadfastly prayed for mercy. That word Louise's pen traced without ceasing. It was on her lips and at the bottom of her heart. Later, when she chose her new baptismal name, a name which was to attach to her regenerated life, the penitent put herself under the protection of the mercy which she had so often invoked in her hours of trial ; she became Sister Louise of Mercy,

just as a woman takes the name of the husband she loves.

One of those thunderbolts which puts fear into the hearts of the strongest, suddenly turned her still wavering heart finally towards God. In June of 1670 France seemed to be at the zenith of its power. The treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle had confirmed the conquests achieved by Turenne in Flanders. Though Franche-Comté was not yet conquered, its conquest was a foregone conclusion. The wise influence of Colbert had at last regulated the laws of commerce and the customs. Shipping prospered. Roads and canals ploughed the country. A treaty with England had obtained for Louis XIV the support of Charles II against Holland. The responsibility for these negotiations belonged to Madame, the seductive Henrietta, whose powers of persuasion with her brother had already been proved at the time of the surrender of Dunkirk. She returned proud and happy after her success in London. Monsieur himself complimented her, and, won back to kinder feelings, returned with her to Saint-Cloud. Suddenly the news came in words immortalized by Bossuet: "Madame is dying." It seemed impossible. That very morning, so warm that it brought back memories of the delicious summer of 1661, Henrietta had bathed in the Seine. Her freshness and the grace of her slender body had been the admiration of all. In the evening, the Duc d'Ayen

hastened to the Tuileries and to Versailles to spread the news of the terrible tragedy.

The Queen, happy and content, was being rowed on the canal. "How frightful!" she exclaimed, hiding her face, and greatly upset she immediately ordered her coach, and, followed by Mlle. de Montpensier and the King, she set out at once for Saint-Cloud. The sight that awaited them has been described many times. On the bed lay a poor little shrivelled-up, pathetic figure, which the approach of death had already rendered livid. Her unfastened chemise showed a thin chest shaken by cries of agony. "Oh, what pain," she cried, "I can bear it no longer!" Madame begged that they should examine the remains of the water that she had just been drinking, because her pains pointed to poison.

It was in this state that those who had loved, distrusted, admired, envied her, those for whom she had represented love, grace, seduction, wit, found their enchantress. Their feelings immediately melted into infinite pity. The King, who was visibly moved, approached his sister-in-law and spoke words of comfort to her, words, at least, that contemporaries found comforting, because they were Christian, but which to us, profane, weak, and timorous believers, appear almost barbarous. Without making use of the tender lies with which we throw a veil over the bed of the invalid, Louis exhorted his sister-in-law

to die bravely, and expressed his sorrow at losing her. In her turn, a worthy daughter of the end of the century in which religious faith and strength in the face of death were equalled by fidelity to the King, Henrietta assured Louis XIV that he had no more devoted servant than she had been. Mistress of herself to the end, she found energy to say: "More than life itself, I regret losing the good graces of Your Majesty." One after the other they came to say good-bye. The Queen, who had long ago forgotten her grievances, kissed her sister-in-law. Monsieur, in spite of all that has been said of him, and of all the dreadful accusations which have been made against him, showed evident signs of his sorrow. Always preoccupied with her own affairs, Mademoiselle had already begun to speculate as to how the widowerhood of her cousin might affect her.

Bossuet arrived at last. He had been Madame's friend. She received him with a smile of which the great orator has said: "Madame was gentle towards death," and from his priestly hand, ornamented with the emerald she had just slipped on his finger, the dying woman received the sacred viaticum. Acts of love and faith were recited to her. Tears mingled with the prayers. The knell of groans rang unceasingly. When Madame had finished speaking, she had ceased to breathe. There was an uproar in the room: "One heard nothing but sobs," affirms Madame de La Fayette, that

tender and celebrated friend who afterwards enshrouded her dear Princesse in the purity of her prose.

If such was the general emotion, what can be said of the gentle and troubled soul of her old lady-in-waiting ? She had for some long time been reconciled with the mistress who had persecuted her with such unjust bitterness, and she only remembered what she owed her, unconsciously, it is true, but undeniably. Madame had been her providence. It was Madame who had received her, the little provincial, on her arrival in Paris. Madame had loved her, had presented her to the King, and had paved for her the way to love. As soon as she had heard the news of the Princess's illness she had rushed off to Saint-Cloud. On her knees, on the floor, she had witnessed the frightful agonies. She had watched the charming face shrivel up before the abyss. She had heard the stern reply of Canon Feuillet to the young woman's moans : " What, Madame ! For twenty years you have offended God and only for six hours have you suffered and made atonement ! " Those words, which applied just as well to her as to Madame, strangely affected Louise. Her thoughts overwhelmed her. " Oh, death," she exclaimed, " how cruel are your reproaches to those who have never given you a thought, and who have placed their hopes in the vanities of this world ! Oh, death, the sight of you is terrible

to those whose pleasures you end and whose apprehensions and sorrows you begin! . . ." She lived all over again the anguish that a few days before she herself had endured when she had looked into the mouth of the pit. She thought of her conduct since. She had turned away from the salvation which the Lord, more merciful towards her than to Madame, had given her time for. She had not profited by it. She had not kept the promises she had made, and all that she had succeeded in accomplishing seemed to her but an attempt, the first mutterings of a new language. What she had mistaken for the summit was only a peak of the barren mountain, the beginning of a journey that must only end at the tomb. Her offerings and her sacrifices were of little account. She had only abandoned that which had been taken from her. In the depths of her weakness she still felt, surging in her, an acute desire to sin again. At the first call anything had been easier than resistance. "Oh, my God, look with pity at the sinner that I am; still burning with the fires of lust! Look on her as Thou looked on Magdalene and bring it about that, like that saintly penitent, I may bathe Thy feet with my tears, and at last come to love Thee!" To love: in that was everything. When a man or a woman has lived a warm, passionate existence, after the inexpressible joys and the pain as precious as the joys, it is impossible to say: "Henceforth I

will live my life in the cold mist!" But to love God, to transfer to Him the ardour that suffocates, to take His soul as the host and hold it up before the gold of the tabernacle, is only to change the object of one's worship.

Louise henceforth advanced into the heart of the mysterious regions of the spiritual garden, where thorns are transformed into roses. Every insult or affront that was offered to her, she made into a sheaf and offered to the God of Forgiveness. With her mind prepared for sacrifice, she resigned herself to accept whatever fate sent her. She resolved to remain where she was, to repent, to suffer, and to expiate her sins in the very place where she had loved. The King's indifference was the sackcloth with which she scourged her flesh. She submitted to his silence and his disdain as payment for her hours of intoxication. Bound more strongly than ever to her companion, she showed her such kindness and gentleness that the latter was astonished. Entirely ignorant of the holy refinement of conversion, Athénaïs wondered what change had come over the soul of her rival. In common with others who were intimate with Louise without understanding her, Mme. de Montespan thought that she had grown apathetic and lukewarm. She looked upon her as a woman insensible to all feeling, and who did not trouble about what was happening round her. In a little while she would

regret the time when her drudge had kicked against her wounds and seasoned the joy of her triumphs with her tears. If she had only heard the confidences which La Vallière made later to the Princesse Palatine in reference to this period of her life! "I suffered the tortures of the damned."

Although at that time Louise had understood the conduct of her torturers, modesty prevented her from showing that she had realized. Their debauchery itself prevented her from bearing witness to anything. There are things that a refined soul is ashamed to admit she has understood, if understanding means to launch out into protestations of disapproval and scenes in which nobility of sentiment would count for nothing. Louise appeared blind. No one during those years suspected the martyrdom suffered in her fine dresses amid the Court's splendour, and to the sound of joyous music. No one will ever know the inmost secrets of the heart which bled with so many wounds.

Everybody was, besides, too agitated, moved and diverted by the latest happenings, to pay attention to the feelings of the King's discarded mistress. A romance, a veritable fairy story, a story such as can only happen in the imagination, had upset the whole Court. Thoroughly to understand its strangeness, we must remember the supreme and indisputable prestige accorded, in

the seventeenth century, to the nobly born, and to those akin to them. To be of the blood royal was a privilege of which, with good cause, princes and princesses were tremendously proud, but at the same time they had to accept the duties that went with it. The first of these duties, particularly when it was a question of marriages, was to put aside all personal feeling and to sacrifice oneself for the good of the State. Louis XIV had himself set the example on the day when he had tearfully renounced his idea of marriage with Marie Mancini. This sacrifice strengthened his right to marry the members of his family at his will.

There was only one person who had thought she was able to resist this authority. Mlle. de Montpensier, the insubordinate daughter of Gaston d'Orleans, had persisted in her refusal to admit that anybody had the right to dispose of her against her will. In advance of the ideas of the time, this independent young woman already professed the famous doctrine of the "right to happiness," and intended to live her life like any simple bourgeoise. She showed this for the first time when she refused to marry Alphonse VI, King of Portugal, exclaiming at the mention of it :

"I do not wish to."

The messenger sent by Louis XIV did his best to persuade her, to convince her that girls of her position should not have any will but that of the

sovereign, but Mademoiselle's obstinacy was absolute. She did not want an ugly husband who did not wash, and who at the age of twenty was not able to read or write. The answer to this insubordination was a decree of exile. This romantic young lady wasted the last three years of her youth making tapestries, buried in the Château d'Eu. When she returned, she was forty, and she had not yet met the man who was to move her. But it is not possible to mix with impunity with people whose only occupation is love-making. After having looked with indifference on the love affairs of the King and Louise de La Vallière, Mademoiselle was struck with the idea of becoming a friend of Mme. de Montespan, an idea for which she was to pay very dearly. She sought her company, accepted favours from her, rendered her services in return, and was amused by her wit. And so it happened that by dint of living on terms of intimacy with such a woman, and from breathing the voluptuous and unsettling atmosphere that surrounded her, Mademoiselle lost her balance. Her heart which, without her knowing it, was looking for adventure, found something to occupy it. After having asked herself for some days why she was at times sad, and at others as gay as a young girl, the heroine of the Fronde was obliged to admit that she was falling in love. A little man with a face that looked as if it had been scratched by a cat, whom we remember as the lover of the

Princesse de Monaco, then at the Bastille, and subsequently busy preparing the King's bed at Compiègne, and at the time ready, had she consented, to marry La Vallière. Lauzun—this was the man who had made himself loved by the granddaughter of Henri IV. She looked upon him as the most honest, the most charming man in all the world. A younger son from Gascony the husband of a Princess Royal! The thing was impossible, and certainly the thought of the misalliance did not please Mademoiselle very much. At the same time, her lonely old-maid's heart was dazzled by the prospect of being married to a man whose success in love affairs was famous, and this last impression was stronger than all the rest.

The difficulty was to get the King to give his consent. At the moment when Mademoiselle had made up her mind to ask it, the death of Henrietta of England rendered her project useless for the time being. Louis XIV, as we have remarked under other sad circumstances, did not waste time in vain regrets. Politics and practical affairs soon overcame his grief. The very night of Madame's death, he turned to his cousin, and pointing to Monsieur, he said: "Here is a vacant place; would you like it?" However tempting may have been the proposal to become sister-in-law to Louis XIV, to a Princess obsessed as she was with the idea of rank, Mademoiselle was in despair.

The passion that consumed her did not allow her to consider any of the advantages of the offer from the point of view of her family pride. To marry Lauzun was her only desire; there was nothing else in the world that she wanted.

Lauzun, though he pretended he was not anxious for the marriage, dreamt of nothing but his elevation. He used every means to achieve his end—humble devotion in the presence of the sovereign, the influence of Mme. de Montespan, and above all, a deputation composed of the Ducs de Créqui, d'Albret, and de Montausier, who, on behalf of the nobility of France, begged the King to grant this great honour to a simple nobleman, and to allow him to marry a Bourbon Princess.

Extraordinary as it may appear, Louis XIV consented. But in giving way to the irresistible affection that this most zealous of all his courtiers inspired in him, he had acted contrary to public opinion, that already raging torrent whose waves, after his death, were to swell and invade his kingdom. The news was awaited with anxiety, the people said: "It cannot be possible!" The Princes considered themselves outraged. Condé remonstrated and the Queen declared that she would not sign the marriage contract. Even the old Duchesse d'Orleans, buried in the Luxembourg, woke up and wrote a letter of protest.

It would be straying too far from our heroine

if we attempted to enter into the different turns of fortune (excellently well related elsewhere) which brought about the breaking of the King's word. Anyway, the noise created by this affair, the persons mixed up in it, the passions which it aroused, and the double game played by Mme. de Montespan, bring us back to La Vallière again, since they show how completely she was forgotten. Not once is her name mentioned either in the copious Memoirs in which Mademoiselle relates the smallest details of her sad romance, or by the pen of Mme. de Sevigné, richer and wittier than ever when she relates: "The most astonishing, the most surprising, the most marvellous, the most miraculous, the most unexpected thing that well-ordered people had ever before beheld."

Only after it was all over, after the will of the monarch had disregarded tears and supplications, do we see La Vallière approaching the afflicted Princess, for with the sisterly soul which made all love troubles appeal to her, she forgot that Mademoiselle was the friend of La Montespan, and did her best to console her.

Although silence and oblivion surrounded the penitent, she was still agitated by misgivings. As each day she came nearer to God, she began to wish to be at a distance from the King. But she could not find the strength to make this supreme sacrifice. She had no one to advise her. For a long time past the face of Bossuet

had haunted Louise's imagination, in fact, ever since the day when, from the pulpit of the Tuileries, he had summoned her to renounce her guilty passion. The voice of the preacher had seemed formidable to her then, and his severe glance and his gestures a reproach. She had trembled before him. But the day when she met him again, with the pastoral ring on his finger beside the bed on which Madame lay dying, her impression had been quite different. There was nothing but kindness and gentleness, and the man of God appeared to her like a messenger of redemption. She thought if only he would consent to guide her conscience everything that now seemed impossible would be made easy, and the paths of virtue would become smooth and attractive.

Bossuet became Louise's confessor. His noble apostolic temperament could not refuse so charitable a task. To accept was in a measure to contribute towards diminishing, if not entirely to put a stop to a scandal which at that time was outraging all decent-minded people. The King publicly showed himself with his two favourites, and the Queen sometimes joined them.

The first advice that Bossuet impressed upon his penitent, and the advice that he repeated to her ceaselessly, was to leave the Court. From what he knew of her proud, sensitive, repentant soul, already well advanced in its piety, she could only find rest in a convent. He spoke to her of

shelters of peace to which he thought she was destined. He praised their absolute calm. "There alone, she would be free from those falls followed by a fresh abandonment, which left her each time more broken. Sisters full of compassion would dry her tears; a mother would second their efforts. And at the end, the love of Christ would be her recompense."

Louise listened and pondered. Although she had not yet been able to liberate herself from the hold of her inexhaustible love, she had, at least, arrived at the point when she longed for it to leave her in peace. "God of Goodness!" she cried, "since Thy power is infinite, take away from my heart this love that agitates and tears it." As long as she had felt that a single spark was alive under the cold cinders of her love, she could not have made up her mind to go away, but at last she began to hope. She no longer had any illusions. The days had succeeded each other, and in five years there had not been one glimmer that had said to her: "The fire still burns."

She felt, therefore, that she was ready. The religious life filled her thoughts. She longed for the rest of the cloister, as a traveller longs for his resting-place. There was only one difficulty still in her way, and that was to obtain the consent of the King. She found it almost impossible to explain to him a desire so contrary to his wishes.

How could she tell him that for the future she wished to live far away from him ?

A fresh proof of his total forgetfulness of her suddenly inspired Louise with the courage that she had lacked. At the end of a ball at which Louis had insisted she should be present, and where he had behaved towards her as if he was not conscious of her presence, even going so far as to brush against her without addressing a word to her, she had a sudden feeling of revolt. The experience was too much for her wounded soul, and after a night spent in prayer, and after having written a renunciation of all her worldly possessions, she dressed herself in a grey dress of almost monastic severity, and on a freezing winter's morning she once again took the road to Chaillot where, eight years before, her tender feet had been so sadly bruised.

This time Louise knocked at the visitors' gate. The Superior received her like a mother. The nuns were glad to see her. She breathed greedily the scent of the wax that came from the chapel. The white cloisters covered her like a cloak. Had she at last arrived at her journey's end ? Not yet ! During vespers, while the solemn waves of Church music submerged her worn-out soul, and while she prayed to the Lord to keep her and not allow her to escape again, the doorkeeper came to say that she was wanted in the parlour. She was oppressed by a sudden fear. She had not for-

gotten that once before he whom she had wished to run away from had come himself to fetch her back. This time it was only a messenger !

It was impossible to gain admittance to the Court of Louis XIV without his permission, and it was equally impossible to leave it without his consent. The liberty that La Vallière had taken suggested thoughts to the King that had not occurred to him before. Entirely deceived by the mask she had assumed, he had never had an idea of the suffering that she had endured. No doubt the pleasure of being adored by his two mistresses, by one in the ecstasy of joy, and by the other in the ecstasy of tears, had seemed to him like two different forms of worship inspired by the same object, and yet another proof of the universal adulation to which he thought he had a right. All at once the truth came to light. The fact that Louise had escaped meant that she had come to the end of her powers of endurance ; the torture of no longer being loved had worn out her courage. For the first time her old lover felt how guilty he had been. Beneath the features that had charmed him in the past he saw again the fervent creature whose love had outlived his own. Her loss made a blank in his life that he felt he could never grow accustomed to. Athénaïs herself affected regrets and tears. They both agreed that Lauzun should be sent hurriedly to Chaillot with an order to bring back the fugitive.

Neither the little man's boldness nor his cleverness—which generally made him a favourite with women—could make any impression on the honest soul of La Vallière. She had always had a feeling of distrust for the professional seducer, and since the rumour about their marriage this distrust had turned into actual repugnance. Without listening to his speeches, she sent Lauzun away and went back to the holy atmosphere in which she hoped to find salvation.

The first night spent in a cell was sweet to the penitent. A deathly silence hovered over the closed house. In its white tower of porcelain the night-light crackled. What rest after so many ceaseless wanderings! At dawn the curtains became transparent; the garden gave her the scent of roses and lime trees. And Louise felt it would be good to live in this retreat.

A second messenger arrived towards midday. This time he was chosen from among the friends of La Vallière, the Maréchal de Bellefonds, a worthy man and one with whom one could discuss matters of the heart. She received him, indeed talked at length with him. But her reply was as follows:

"Tell the King, I beg you, that as I have lost the honour of his favour, I ought to have left the Court a long time ago, and that I should have done so, if I could have found the strength never to see him again. If I attempt this sacrifice to-day it

is because God has been pleased to help me, and because He has made me understand the necessity of giving myself up to Him."

In reply to the advice which the Maréchal offered her, more with a desire to acquit himself of his mission than from any personal conviction, Louise said :

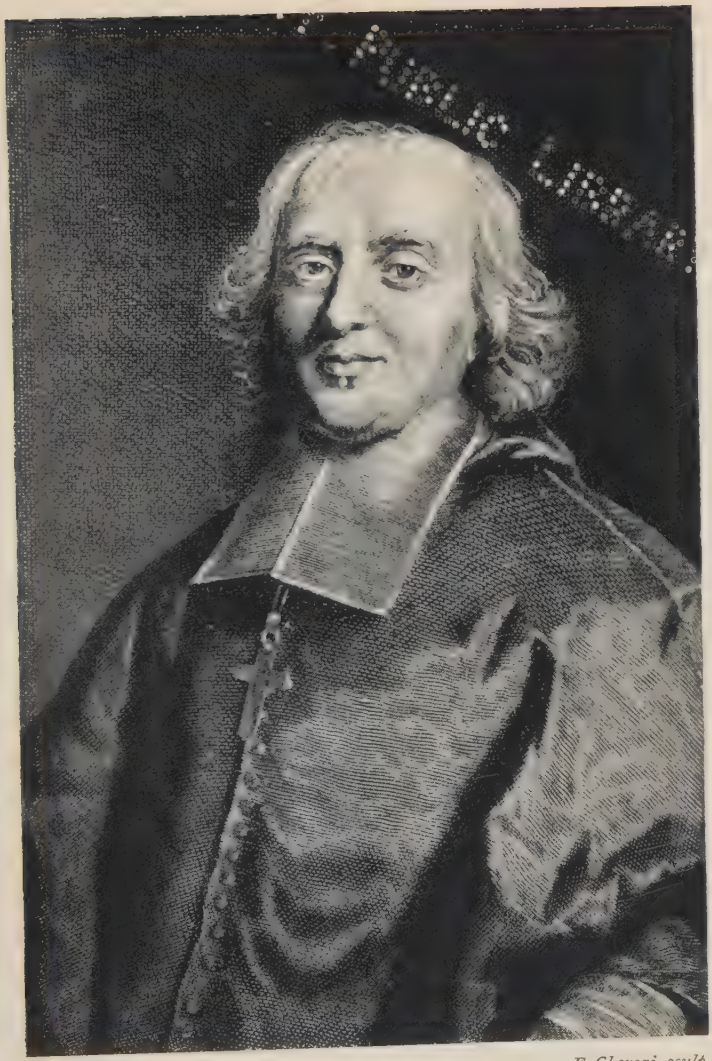
" Is it not just that the passion of which I have been guilty should help me in my penitence ? Is it not just that after having consecrated my youth to the King, I should give the rest of my life to God ? "

These words when they were repeated to Louis XIV caused him keen emotion. Echoes were awakened in his conscience. He began to wonder if after all he had a right to oppose that which God had exacted, and if in turning away a soul from the cloister he was not undertaking a heavy load of responsibility. But whether it was the idea that he was losing his worshipper which made her more precious in his eyes, or whether it was only the wish to make Athénaïs jealous which moved the King's desire, it was certainly increased tenfold. He sent for Colbert, that faithful executor of his orders, and sent him forthwith to Chaillot, ordering him to use his authority, if necessary, to bring La Vallière back.

" Assure her," he added, " that if she persists in her idea of becoming a nun, I shall not oppose it ; but let it be later on and not to-day."

This promise did more than all the rest to facilitate Colbert's mission. On leaving the cell where she thought she had found shelter for ever, Louise embraced the Superior. They both wept. They said "à bientôt," and full of hope and resignation the fugitive again took the road to Versailles.

Many memories awaited her! What a contrast with the other return. . . . The first moments, however, were full of happiness. Her relations and servants received her with joy. Mme. de Montespan herself, to whom lying came easily, went to meet "her friend." The King wept when he saw Louise. We know that the tears of Louis XIV were neither rare nor a sign of profound feeling. Perhaps those he shed that day were sincere. . . . They were, in any case, very soon dried. If for one moment Louise had conceived the illusion that she had inspired him with tender regret, if she had believed in a resurrection of the dead flame, it was not long before her heart was disillusioned. The King made sure that his plaything was there again at his command, and that he could make use of her as he would, and then his eyes turned away from her to her rival. Her presence was enough. Now should the necessity arise, they could say to M. de Montespan: "Well, what have you to say?" A fact that throws light on the subject was that the Châtelet, although ordered by the King, had not yet carried its



H. Rigaud, pinx *F. Chereai, sculp.*

ARCHBISHOP BOSSUET

decree of separation. Legally the Marquise was still dependent on her husband, and both she and the King feared some scandalous move from a man who was very far from taking his trouble patiently.

The world, which only judges our actions by the result, was not indulgent towards La Vallière. Although she was gentle, kind, and much esteemed, everyone was glad when she left Versailles. Honest people, who deplored the public scandal in which day by day the monarch lost a little of his dignity, rejoiced that one of the two favourites had at last gone away. The Queen's friends thanked Heaven. As for those of Montespan . . . It was by them that the cruel remarks were made. According to them the King would long ago have been glad to get rid of such a tearful creature : " He has far too much consideration for her," said some of them. " She has behaved like a fool," said others. And in the midst of all this tittle-tattle not one kind word, not a word of sympathy, bore witness to the fact that one single heart had shared her sorrow. Not a soul realized the humble submission or the magnitude of the sacrifice made by the victim who, in going away, had asked for mercy, and in allowing herself to be brought back had consented once again to take up the burden she had laid down.

Even the charming Mme. de Sevigné found nothing more in this touching struggle than an

occasion for fun. "Mme. de La Vallière," she writes, "does not speak any more of retiring; it is quite enough to have said it. Her chambermaid flung herself on her knees to prevent her. How could she resist such an appeal?"

It remained to be proved, however, that nothing in the conduct of Louise had been a pretence. For another year she lived at Court, and, since it was necessary, she maintained the trappings of the rank which the King had forced her to accept. But her soul was a stranger to it all. Overwhelmed by the sense of her shame, she gave up everything that was evidence of it. Carriages, laces, jewels, grew insupportable to her. She sold her diamonds and gave the money to the poor. The steward of her estates at Vaujours received orders to reduce the imposts and to give alms. Many of her numerous servants were discharged. She lived simply, among religious emblems, in a room which was almost poverty-stricken. The flowers and scents which she had loved lost their charm. Since the burning rays of love no longer inspired her, she took no interest in anything. Even Versailles, that she had admired and loved so dearly, seemed to her tarnished and inharmonious. She turned away from the statues, and shut her soul from the music. The woman with refined tastes, the artist who had loved all that was exquisite and delicate, pined in inactivity. She sat with idle hands on

the benches which in other days had found her radiant and happy. She dreamed of the day, soon to come, when in a dress of coarse cloth, and with bare feet, she would become the bride of Christ.

During this period of her life, when Louise was preparing herself for her last retreat, Mme. de Maintenon asked her one day if she had thought of the sufferings that awaited her—coarse clothes, a cell, cold in winter, and burning heat in summer.

"When I shall be suffering at the convent," replied the future Carmelite, "I shall only have to remember what they have made me suffer here, and all pain will seem light to me," at the same time pointing at Mme. de Montespan, who at that moment seemed to be scornfully whispering about her to the King.

Passions that are fought generally grow weaker. Little by little, Louise began to overcome the jealousy which, at the beginning, had tortured her. As she no longer placed Louis on the pedestal where her mad adoration had raised him, she felt less violent hatred for the woman who had separated him from her. The lover of Athénaïs was no longer the perfect hero in whom a young girl's imagination had seen a Cæsar, an Alexander, an ideal knight! Valuing him less, she wept less bitterly for her loss of him. Her repentance was absolute, and without any doubts, and she discovered to her surprise that a strange feeling of

consolation followed it. She began to breathe the essence of forgiveness mingling with the bitterness of her sin. If love sometimes hurt her still, she was not disturbed. While her flesh regretted, she realized at the same time how much of it was perishable. Unconsciously, the exquisite strength of religion came to her. She found prayer again as if it were the country of her childhood, and forgiveness came to her like a pure white cloak. Almost without an effort she made her way towards the glorious kingdom. God no longer appeared a judge, the formidable executioner whom she feared. He became humanized and took that earthly form in which He came amongst us. He became the visible Christ, the young Master, who in man's image had loved, and wept, and been basely betrayed. She saw in Him the Bridegroom, and she began to love him.

If since her downfall, La Vallière had lost many friends, she found one, at least, a warm-hearted, devoted friend, that incomparable treasure in our hours of trial. This was the Maréchal de Bellefonds, who, having been honoured with the royal favour, had had many opportunities of coming in contact with the favourite, and of appreciating her rare qualities. They had suddenly found themselves thrown together by their common misfortune. Almost at the same time as Mme. de Montespan had supplanted Louise, she obtained the post of Governor of Paris, which

had been promised to the Maréchal, for her father, the Duc de Mortemart. Proud and hasty, Bellefonds vigorously resented the injustice that had been done him. Although his character had many points of resemblance with that of La Vallière, notably that of always sacrificing his interests when his heart was at stake, he could not follow her example and permit his rival to have preference over him. At first, he tried to forget his grievances in follies of all kinds; in races where he risked his neck, and in running up debts enough to swallow his whole fortune. But a man cannot succeed by such means in forgetting a trouble that has taken possession of his whole being. Remembering that he was a Breton, and finding that at the bottom of his soul he had the remains of the religious feeling that came to him from his Christian mother, he suddenly left the Court, and under the guidance of the Abbé de Rance, that emperor of the converted, he went into retreat at the Trappist Monastery. On coming from there, touched by the divine grace, Bellefonds was worthy to sympathize with the authoress of *Les Réflexions sur la Miséricorde de Dieu*. One of those serious and deep friendships, formed when one gives one's hand in the hour of need, bound them together for many years. We have already seen the Maréchal taking to the King words which should have decided him to leave Louise where she had chosen to take

refuge ; we shall see him, in the future, determined to guide her back there, or, at least, planning the means by which this lost soul might again find the right path.

The letters that they exchanged, particularly those written by Louise, that have been handed down to us, enable us almost day by day to witness the mysterious work of purification. It seems as if, in a series of emotions and voluntary transports, the soul is lifted above itself and becomes stronger than the body. The first of these is written from Tournay, where Louis XIV had insisted that she, as well as Mme. de Montespan, should be in his suite. It is not astonishing that this letter should express profound trouble, when we know the orders that Louvois, who was in charge of the arrangements for the lodging of the Court during the voyage, gave to his steward : " Mme. La Duchesse de La Vallière is to occupy room number 1, in which a door must be made so that the King can go through it secretly to Mme. de Montespan's room."

" You have peace in your heart," wrote Louise, " and I envy you ; I have not yet reached it. However, I remember our last conversation, and I am proud to say that I have profited by it. It seems to me I am doing wonders, but I shall still have need of your counsel to prevent me from going back to the troubles that you know of. . . ."

How was she to evade those troubles ? The

moments spent with the King stirred up all over again and scattered in a whirlwind the cinders of her smouldering heart. Would the demon conquer after all? Once again she got a hold on herself and pulled herself together while the struggle continued: "At last I am beginning to love God really, to feel the pleasure that there is in loving Him," she exclaimed. She leant on this new love, which she used as a shield against the old one. Sometimes she grew weary. She was thrown back; but she did not fall to the level of sin. A dearly bought experience succeeded in saving her. Not only did she have misgivings about approaching the King, of looking at him, or of hearing the sound of his voice; but she herself avoided him of her own free will. She knew the weakness of her flesh and bones, and feared it. She knew that she must carry her resolutions as in a closed vessel. Her correspondent gave her courage and praised the joys of piety. Sometimes even he used to scold her, and warn her against her imminent danger. "You are fearful for me," she replied, "and you are quite right. But what can I do? I am weakness personified!"

Although he had made great strides towards perfection, the Maréchal had too much sense to imagine that he, a courtier and a soldier, was capable of guiding the conscience of a woman. He left the care of this to his friend Bossuet, an

admirable guide who, with wise indulgence that was at the same time firm, helped the repentant sinner, and furnished her with the weapons, although he insisted that she should fight the battle herself. "The Bishop of Condom," she wrote, "is an excellent man, not only on account of his wit and kindness, but because of his love of God and his neighbour." And, indeed, as we read the letters addressed to the Maréchal de Bellefonds by the greatest genius of his century on the subject of their mutual friend, we are struck by the sentiments he expresses. No doubt at the beginning he found Louise was making but slow progress. "A nature stronger than hers would already have advanced further," he writes, "but she must not be hurried, or made to undertake more than she can accomplish." He was tactful with her, and only asked her to make efforts which, little by little, grew stronger as the strength of the convert increased. Soon Bossuet's care was rewarded. "It seems to me," he states, "that without any conscious effort on her part, the spiritual affairs of Mme. de La Vallière will now go forward. God never leaves her; without violence He is succeeding in breaking the bonds that held her." And later he says: "Truly her sentiments are almost inspired; I cannot think of them without feeling the Grace of God. The mark of God's finger is the strength and the humility that accompanies all her thoughts.

He speaks and she obeys. I do the talking and she the work. All this delights and bewilders me. . . ."

Family ties were among her chief bonds, and tearful claims, and selfish struggles for their own interests, arose at once after the announcement of her departure. The Marquise de Saint-Rémy, a woman who entirely lacked the maternal instinct, did not fail to remember she was a mother at the moment when that title could be used to her advantage. The romantic Mlle. de Saint-Rémy, who afterwards became Mme. d'Hautfeuille, recognized her sister. Louise's generous intervention obtained a pension of a thousand crowns for each of them. Her brother, the Governor-General of Bourbonnais, richly provided with all kinds of official posts, had no need of her ; and his wife, the charming Gabrielle Glé de La Costardière, whose sisterly encouragement had been such a support to Louise, remained the Queen's friend. There were the children to consider. As we have said before, never had a daughter and a son belonged less to their mother than Mlle. de Blois and the Comte de Vermandois. But the Duchess was really affected the day after a fête given by Mme. Colbert, at which little Marie-Anne, charmingly dressed as a grown-up lady, had said many clever things and been generally admired. She struggled now against a more tender feeling. It seemed as if she was fighting against herself, and

did not allow herself to be easily moved. "I must confess to you," she wrote to the Maréchal, who was anxious about her vocation, "that at the sight of my pretty daughter, I felt joyful. I love her, but even she will not hold me back for a single moment. I see her with pleasure, but I shall leave her without pain. How do you explain this?"

She was resolved to separate herself from all earthly affection, but she wished to leave some memory of their mother to the two children who were the result of her sin. Perhaps she thought in admiring her picture and seeing her as she had been, they would feel an indulgent love for their fair and fragile mother. Mignard had tried several times to paint Louise—as the Magdalene weeping on a rock, as a Duchess with her mantle of velvet—but there exists no canvas so wonderful as that owned by the Comte d'Oilliamson, which represents her with her children, amid the luxury which she was so soon to abandon. She is seated; there is an air of serenity on her sweet face; her bodice of white silk, lined with a material worked with pearls, clings to her like a shell. The large sleeves, caught in with a silken cord, are like the unfurled sails of a ship just setting out to sea. She is wearing no jewels, and no scaffolding of feathers weighs down her head as in her other portraits; her hair is simply arranged, and coiled closely round her head, a prophecy of the nun's

head-dress which was already being made ready to replace her beautiful hair. In her hand she is holding a full-blown rose, and on the ground lies a purse of gold, a mask, and a guitar—symbols of the vanities which she was leaving behind and which she has already trodden under foot. In the hands of the pretty child, Mlle. de Blois, of whom great things were predicted, Mignard placed two books which were to be Louise's only reading in the future—*The Imitation of Jesus Christ,* and *The Rules of Saint-Teresa.* He wrote at the base of a column the words, " Sic transit gloria mundi." And in these few simple words her whole story is told. The drama has come to its end, and as we, a generation later, pause before this picture, it is impossible not to be affected by the thought that so much grace, and youth, and love, should have been buried alive.

Louise was now only undecided as to the choice of the convent where she should end her days. Many invited her. She was herself very much inclined towards the Visitation de Chaillot, where the Superior had received her so kindly, and where for twelve years her friend of other days, Madeleine de La Motte-Agencourt, had lived. Considerations of friendship, however, did not have much weight with a soul already so detached from the affairs of the world. The penitent desired more austerity than was contained in the rules laid down by the gentle François de Sales.

There was one order, distinguished above all others by its severities, its fasts, its continual silence, and the kind of living death that obtained behind its gates—the Carmel. . . . Like a mystic standard the name of its sainted founder floats above its walls. The women who lived there wore coarse clothes, and their feet were bare in their wooden sandals. The bell called them several times during the night to prayer. They were hot, they were cold, they worked hard, and ate badly. It was there, in the enclosed community in the Faubourg Saint-Jacques, that the woman whose life had been full of refinement and daintiness yearned to shut herself up. One day, when she had been present at a ceremony of taking the veil, Louise had crossed the threshold of the cloister of the chapel, and her soul, tormented with a thousand anxieties, was struck by the serenity stamped on the faces of the Carmelites. Never had she seen hands that were steadier or surer than those of the young novice who lighted the candles on the altar. Never had music seemed more like the song of angels than the notes of the liturgy accompanied by the little organ.

There was one obstacle to this. The pure daughters of Saint-Teresa only received amongst them those who had led lives of chastity. Devoting themselves to the expiation of universal sin, it was against their rules to receive penitents. To pray for their own sins seemed to them a

selfish use of themselves. They were as virgin wax, only to be lighted before the Tabernacle of the Lamb.

It was only the intervention of the Maréchal de Bellefonds with the Prioress, Mother Agnes of Jesus, who was a relative of his, that obtained an exception in favour of La Vallière. And even then, it was a long time before she consented. She feared a protestation, or, at any rate, trouble among her company of innocents. Louise's sin had been so widely known. Bossuet, who was better able than anyone else to answer for his penitent, helped largely, no doubt, to the breaking of the rule.

On hearing that the victory had been won, Louise was overwhelmed with joy. As soon as she knew that one day the gate with triple locks would open to receive her, and that the black cloth of redemption would be spread over her body, she wrote to the man who had interceded for her, and said: "You have given me great joy. But the time seems so long! When can I get away?"

There were still numerous obstacles. Besides those already referred to—children, relatives, friends, whose arguments were very pressing since her project had been made known—Louise was a captive (it seems almost unbelievable) of her creditors! She who was so simple and modest by nature had, during the time when she had

tried to outdo the splendour of her rival, exceeded her income. She owed no less than fifty thousand pounds, and had nothing with which to pay her debts. Vaujours was entailed, and she could not dispose of it. Louis XIV alone could have released her. But to ask the King for anything was what Louise had never done. And this caused her greater and more persistent fear than kneeling on flagstones or tearing her flesh with sackcloth. She tried to gain time. She approached friends from whom she hoped to get the sum she needed. Her complaints leave us to suppose that she had no real friends. "I find I can get no help from the persons from whom I thought I might expect it. Must I then ask the master? You know what that thought means to me?" Days passed and her affairs were no further advanced. Nervous disorders affected her health; she could neither sleep nor eat. Day by day she saw the yoke against which her pride resisted coming nearer and nearer to her. "It is not the thought of leaving the Court for the Cloister," she exclaimed, "that is so dreadful; but having to ask a favour from the King! . . ."

Bossuet, whose charitable soul was always ready to help the weak, undertook the mission. He arranged that the financial difficulties that Louise had incurred should be put in order. However, when he went to ask the King for the captive's liberty, when as a priest he enjoined him

to give back to God a soul that was detached from all earthly vanities, Athénaïs' lover resisted.

He still perhaps had some secret feeling for the love of his youth. But this cannot have been very strong, because for months Louis had completely lost all interest in La Vallière, and her pale face and dejected manner had almost ceased to affect him. But he decided that his victim should pass another winter at Versailles, and he insisted that she should be present at all the fêtes of the Carnival. The reason for this was still the same. Until the judicial separation had been pronounced between the Marquise and the Marquis de Montespan, it was desirable to do everything possible to keep his mistress in safety from her husband. Two children had already been born of the royal adultery, and another was expected. It was necessary that they should be attributed to the old favourite. Of course, Louise did not lend herself to this. She was not so supernaturally good-natured as to allow herself to be declared a mother in the place of her rival; but her weakness or her kindness of heart prompted her to be the godmother. At the time when she had been subjected to disgrace, reproach, shame, and injustice, God gave her the opportunity of a sublime self-denial. In the parish church of Saint-Germain-en-Laye, she held in her arms at its baptism a child christened Louise-Françoise,

the daughter of the King and Mme. de Montespan. In the association of the two names, hers and her rival's, we can gauge a nature which was absolutely steeped in sacrifice.

When this last abdication of herself was completed, an ineffable joy penetrated Louise's heart. She knew a happiness which was not of this world, and which did not resemble human happiness. It was like a foretaste of the joys that came to her as soon as she set foot in the strange kingdom of the saints. After that, however hurtful might be the trials of the last few months of isolation in the surroundings that had been the scene of her paradise, they would appear light to her. There was not a bush at Versailles, nor a pathway, which did not arouse a swarm of memories. Not one of those *salons* of which she had been the queen, the radiant and cherished fairy, which did not renew in her heart regrets for the happiness she had lost. But her torment was soon to end, and then if her soul was overburdened with suffering the deserted mistress could throw herself at the feet of Mother Agnes and receive consolation.

Often, too, she bemoaned her fate to Bossuet: "I have only another step to take to belong to God; but that step is an abyss." The great bishop pitied his penitent; he encouraged and supported her. She could count on him; the hand that had been stretched out to guide her

would never leave the helm until he had brought her safely into harbour.

There were still difficulties in the way. At heart Athénaïs had never ceased to fear her rival, and she had wished her safely in a convent long ago—forgotten—dead. This vocation that had been spoken of for so long, and which had only resulted in a flight of twenty-four hours, made her suspect a ruse to soften the King's heart. Her own interests, however, influenced the Marquise. She insisted upon the presence of the woman who covered her misconduct and assured her safety. It was useless for Bossuet to implore, and to point out what a crime it was to oppose the ways of God, the favourite refused to liberate her captive. After one of these fruitless visits, Bossuet wrote to the Maréchal de Bellefonds: "The retreat of Madame de La Vallière is the cause of veritable storms here. How much it costs to save a soul!" A month later, his efforts having obtained a promise, he expresses his satisfaction: "The world is thwarting Mme. de La Vallière, but God is very merciful. I hope that God will gain the day and that we will see her one day in a high degree of sanctity."

The winter was over and the King announced his intention to return to the country. Louise trembled. Was she again to be forced to join in the procession? Was she to be seen occupying the third place in the coach in which last year

she was seated on the left of the King? She implored Christ to spare her this drive of Calvary, and Christ remembered that Simon of Cyrene had helped Him to carry His heavy cross. The decree which had been awaited for six years was at last granted by the Châtelet.

The semblance of secrecy that had surrounded the King's love was now no longer necessary. Mme. de Montespan had ceased to be in the power of a husband. The parliament registered the acts of legitimacy by which the bastards Louis-Augustus, Louis-Cæsar, and Louise-Françoise, were recognized and legitimatized under the titles of : Duc de Maine, Comte de Vexin, Mlle. de Nantes. The aspect of the Court was entirely changed. Everybody knew that now Françoise-Athénaïs de Rochechouart-Mortemart was the mistress of Louis XIV, and no one had the right to speak. There was no longer any need to keep up appearances. Louise's part was played. She herself sang the hymn of her deliverance : " I leave the world," she wrote, " on the 19th of March, 1674, without a regret ; but this has not been achieved without suffering. For a long while my weakness held me back, but by the will of God I am to-day enraptured. I hasten to acknowledge the mercy He has shown me by abandoning myself in Him." The poor soul had reached the end of her strength. The bitter cup had been drunk to the dregs. There was not a

drop of gall that had not been swallowed. But at last truth conquered. That same evening Mme. de Montespan invited La Vallière to supper. She was in doubt whether she should accept. The Carmelite nun of to-morrow would be hopelessly out of place at a noisy party. But she risked nothing by going. She had said her goodbyes. Louis' words had been ceremonious. The indifference with which he allowed her to take her leave of him gave her the certainty that if she had to face the future in her present surroundings it would be as painful as the past. Without misgiving the deserted mistress could sup at the table of her lover. He might still with a single word have the power to hold her, but that word would not be spoken. His love was dead. The supper was one of shadows.

Without ostentation or weakness, Louise paid the visits that etiquette demanded. She did it with the dignity that accompanied all her actions. As a rule she was admired. A few, however, unable from their own mediocrity to understand, blamed her for confessing her sin publicly. "Since my sins were known to all," she replied, "it is necessary that the repentance should also be known."

There was one last thing left to do; one, no doubt, which cost most to her sensitive and proud heart: to take leave of the Queen. For some long time past, ever since Montespan had taught

her the infinite degrees that can exist in the same offence, Maria-Teresa had felt an affection for La Vallière. She remembered the little violet eager to hide herself and her sin. Perhaps even queens have their moments of generosity. Perhaps she regretted her acts of injustice. Their sufferings had been so much alike. They had both shed many tears on the tomb of their common love. And now Louise was going! She would be the first to end her sufferings. When the Queen saw her old rival at her feet she raised her up with a kindly gesture, and assured her of her forgiveness. In reality, she envied her. Her heart would also have been glad to escape the horror of sharing her husband. The isolation of the cloisters was surely to be preferred to the presence of Montespan on the cushions of her coach? But God only delivers queens when He sends them to sleep in their graves.

The next day, the Duchesse heard mass in the chapel at Versailles. The King attended and sat beside her. He shed a few tears, they say the last, and certainly they were not uncalled-for. These two, who had loved each other entirely and beautifully, in spite of the laws of God and man, were never to see each other again. Strong, glorious, full of new hopes, one was going to fulfil his warlike destiny; the other, so young, that one might almost have mistaken her for a virgin, more beautiful than she had ever been,

was taking away with her to the cloister a soul that had been shattered. When she bowed before the King, she tried to speak ; her mouth half opened, but her heart hesitated on her lips. She gave him a sad and gentle glance. . . . Louis turned away his eyes. . . .

On the pavement of the courtyard two carriages awaited the Duchesse : one contained her relations and friends, who wished to accompany her as to a funeral. Before taking her place in the other with her children, she gave one look at the place from which she was tearing herself away. The palace was very beautiful in the clear azure morning ! She thought of her illusion on the day twelve years before, when for the first time she crossed its threshold. She was then beside the King. He loved her as much as she loved him. The future lay before them as bright as the dawn.

A morbid desire to bring memories to life again, to take away with her images which were to obsess her for a long time to come and make her suffer from the old cherished wound, led Louise to the terrace above the park. The magnificent landscape of Le Nôtre spread nobly before her. She saw once again the green carpet, the staircase, the balustrades, the pale procession of statues, and the festive vegetation that April distributes among the bushes. Visions of happy days came back to haunt her memory—the enchanted gardens

of Armide, the languishing music, the walks in the evening with her breast trembling against her lover's shoulder! A dark and painful fear came to her heart. In future it would be for another that the lakes would be filled with stars, the rose creepers bear roses, the flower gardens be full of colour! Where would she be then? These regrets came one after the other so rapidly that she felt stifled by them. . . .

The carriage took her away. Soon she was at the end of the grand avenue, and Versailles had faded out of sight. Louise began to feel calmer. And then through the budding woods, Paris could be seen, clear, pathetic, submerged in blue smoke. A strange feeling of peace came over her soul; for every place is a shelter to one flying from storms. She passed the lazy Seine, the deserted Tuileries, Notre-Dame, that sublime vessel whose prow points to the east, and at last she reached the Faubourg Saint-Jacques. Almost opposite the Val-de-Grâce rises a noble gateway framed by two columns. A crowd had gathered, for the news had been spread abroad that on that day the gates would open and then shut on the Duchesse de La Vallière for ever. She had come to the entrance of the Carmel.

CHAPTER X

THE CARMEL

MOST of the religious houses on the hill of Sainte-Geneviève have disappeared, and little is left of the noble mouldings, the church porches, and the chapels. The deep shade where lost souls came to meditate and dream has disappeared. Tramways run on the site of the Seminary of Saint-Magloire, where the bell of the Benedictines called the people to prayer, where Feuillantines, Visitandines, Ursulines, chanted their sweet anthems. Busy people fill the air with their agitations, and it is in vain that the eye tries to find sacred imprints on this soil sown with prayers. However, at the crossing of the Rue Saint-Jacques and the Rue Pierre-Nicole a few vestiges still remain of the Carmel where Louise de La Vallière lived; but in such a degraded state of ruin, and so strangely entangled with vulgar buildings, that they can scarcely be recognized. It was here, behind high walls, that a woman expiated for thirty years the crime of having loved too well, it was here that, regarding

herself to the end as the lowest of the low, she earned divine forgiveness.

A few of the daughters of Saint-Teresa brought from Spain by Mme. Acarie, afterwards Marie of the Incarnation, had joined the community at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Their cells, constructed according to plans sent from Avila, were extremely poverty-stricken ; the walls were whitewashed with lime, and contained a stool and a bench, and a mattress made of long blades of straw served as a bed, with a covering but no sheets. But though the interior arrangements were in keeping with the vow of poverty, the architecture by its nobility, by the grandiose symmetry of its lines, by its arches, its galleries, and its little steeples, bore witness that a monastery is, above all, the dwelling-place of God. Three large windows supported by a thin turret, and the columns of the fine porch, which speak of a glorious past, remain standing to this day. Only one tree has escaped the massacre of the gardens. As for the little building which tradition has named the Oratory of La Vallière, it would probably have been better had it disappeared with the rest. It is now a carpenter's workshop, and if it were not for the monograms of Jesus and Mary entwined together on the front, no one would imagine that it was a sacred and pathetic relic.

As soon as she had crossed the threshold of the

convent, Louise flung herself at the feet of the Reverend Prioress and said to her: "My mother, I have made such bad use of my liberty all my life that I have come to place it within your hands." And then, wishing already to emulate, outwardly at any rate, the life of the nuns which she had come to share, she obtained the favour of being allowed to dress herself that very day in the brown dress of the Carmelites. That was not all. The mystic zeal that obsessed her, her anxiety to deprive herself, her self-denial, the desire to be herself no longer, to keep nothing that had belonged to the sinner, inspired a supreme sacrifice. With her own hands she cut off her hair. The adorable golden fleece into which the King had plunged his hands she threw aside like a garment that is of no further use. After that who could mock her any longer? Who could doubt her resolution?

When the details of the day were related at Court they made a great impression. No one any longer doubted that the Duchesse de La Vallière had disappeared for ever. Those who, the night before, still remained incredulous of her vocation, were convinced. The cruel tongues were ashamed of the calumnies they had invented. Mocking smiles were no longer permissible about a repentance marked by such overwhelming proofs. Mme. de Montespan herself, whose distrust had never ceased, and who, to the last, had feared

Louise would change her mind, felt that this time she had won the contest. Never, she now felt sure, would the soft eyes of her rival enter into competition with hers. It was finished, quite finished, and there was no longer any necessity for her to fear that the King's heart would be taken from her!

As a matter of fact, the danger for Athénaïs was not to come from that quarter. La Vallière's old lover was never to return to her who had been the flower of his youth. From the moment that she was able to tear herself away from him, the memory of Louise ceased to exist. She had lost even her last chance—to inspire regret. What Louis XIV prized above all in women was not so much the charm of their person, as the reflection of his image in them, the mirror of love offered by a soul bewitched. To endear herself to him, a mistress had to give him the impression that she only lived and breathed in his presence. Were it only by an excess of suffering, this tyrant wished to feel that he had slaves in those he had ceased to love. By freeing herself, Louise had irretrievably broken down the feeling that he was indispensable, to which the King clung so tenaciously. She had offended and hurt him. She had been guilty of *lèse majesté* in preferring anyone to him, even God.

The day after La Vallière had left Versailles Louis XIV began another campaign. With his

mind yearning for greater glory, he marched towards Franche-Comté. Dragoons, grenadiers, light horse, men-at-arms, made the road ring behind him. The infantry marched past in superb uniforms of blue, and grey, and white, edged with scarlet lace. The officers were distinguished by their beautifully embroidered coats and by the plumes that waved in their hats. They were loudly applauded. The fife and drum echoed. Coaches carrying princesses closed the procession with true glitter.

During the first stage nothing was discussed but the event of the day: the retreat of La Vallière. Many admired her, some pitied her, and even the sceptics were moved. Mlle. de Montpensier alone, whose aggressive soul could not bear to hear the praises of a person of whom she had, on all occasions, declared herself the enemy, said impatiently: "After all, what is there so astonishing about it? . . . It is not the first time that a sinner has done penance."

And they spoke of other things.

Mother Agnes of Jesus, being a woman of age and experience, had thought it would be best to initiate the penitent gradually in the austerities of the Carmel. Prudence advised her, anyway, during the first weeks to spare the delicate body of the woman who had put herself in her hands. With this idea, she shortened the excessive length of some of the fasts and wanted to allow some

softer linen to replace the material that was to be worn next to her skin and which was generally so rough that it always irritated and sometimes cut.

But Louise complained bitterly when she discovered that the best pieces at table were kept for her plate, and that she was the only woman to wear a linen chemise under her gown. Was it not sufficient that she was in herself, alas! so different from the others, who for the most part had lived a life of chastity. Was it necessary that because of her sins they should take particular care of her? "I have come here," she said, "to find equality with my companions: if I am to be distinguished, let it be, I pray, by an excess of severity." Her request was granted, and she gained permission to follow all the rules for the future. Not only did she submit, but each privation she underwent rejoiced and exalted her, and seemed to her like a bath of purity in which she could steep her soul. Fasts, abstinences, nocturnal awakenings, interminable vigils on her knees, became a habit to a body accustomed to ease. Taking as her motto the device of another celebrated penitent: "The body has sinned, let the body be punished!" she set herself the hardest penances. Nothing was too much for her zeal; no humiliation too low in her eyes, to please her new bridegroom. Placed among the lay-sisters, she learnt to sweep, to wash, and, if necessary, to

cook. The Queen, during one of the frequent retreats that she made to the Carmel, saw from her window one day, a nun crossing the courtyard of the convent, carrying an enormous bundle of linen. It was La Vallière. The figure which had been tightened into corsets of satin, the nape of the neck on which diamonds and pearls had been displayed, was bent under the weight of her load—and Maria-Teresa wept.

One rule, however, was almost unbearable to the postulant. Her delicate feet, those nymph-like feet, found it fearful agony to wear the hard soles and the strap of rope of which the Spanish sandals were made. The inconvenience of this foot-wear brought from Spain by the daughters of Saint-Teresa hurt the dainty dancer of bygone days. She accepted it, however, and without ever getting used to it endured it to her dying day.

One of the first impressions that Louise had on being admitted to the sacred circle was one of unutterable peace, the relaxation caused by the accomplishment of a great aim. Just as a child abandons itself between strong and powerful arms, she let herself be guided with entire confidence by the advice of the Mother Superior. Under the white linen that imprisoned the fine oval of her cheeks, and half covered her forehead, she felt the tranquillity of water held in the confines of a basin. "I have only been here two days," she wrote to the Maréchal Bellefonds,

" and my soul is so content, so tranquil, that I worship the goodness of God." Everything charmed and enchanted her ; the atmosphere, the perfume of the chapel, the nude severity of the walls where glistened an ebony crucifix, the noble mission of the sisters who passed slowly in single file, their faces calm and placid. She heard their sad voices coming from the black veils as from deep darkness, and, pierced by the splendour of the chastity, she forgot the obstacles, the clamourings, the dangers from which her unhappy being had escaped. A feeling of relief and comfort filled her. She was like a traveller who, after a rough voyage, arrives at last in the river. The hours passed and she did not realize their length. She had been so weary and she needed rest so much.

A curious resemblance struck Louise between the holy home and the palace she had left ! Superficially the difference was immense, but in both everything spoke, everything had the same significance ; a thousand details told the end of dreams, and these dreams were identical. " To love " was the ambition of both the cloister and the palace. Women assembled in both for adoration, and if the object of the adoration was not the same, the expression was analogous. Praise is the principal occupation of those who love and worship God, the incense which mounts to His throne is much the same as that which is

offered to a king. Louise continued in her element. Her heart consumed itself, and, stretched on the stones before the altar, she continually prayed to God to keep her and save her. As before, she felt the holy fire. Her hopes were without limit, and beneath the curtain of her eyelids her vision was strangely clear.

But Mother Agnes of Jesus, to whom all souls were transparent, did not allow her to lose herself in clouds of mysticism. Fewer prayers, she insisted, and more work. An unexpected happiness rewarded Louise for her obedience. Whether she was seated on the stool in her cell, her fingers busy with sewing, or whether she was engaged in some more tiring task, it seemed to her that a fresh bandage was being constantly wound round her wounds.

Once her work was finished she delighted in simple recreations. The garden was silent and vast, and seemed to be more than a hundred miles from the town. The shade there was pure and profound ; the innocence of the birds filled the branches with gay songs, and if two nuns brushed against each other in their walk, their robes made a noise like the leaves detached by the autumn breezes.

The time of trial imposed on postulants before admittance to the novitiate varies from three to six months. During this delay a careful watch is kept on them. Their gifts, their fitness, the

tendency of their characters, are earnestly studied. An experienced nun is ordered to note the slightest symptoms that affirm the existence of a vocation as well as those that deny it. Sister Agnes, to whom Louise de La Vallière came for guidance and initiation, was greatly impressed by her. No one had ever seemed better prepared for the convent life than this soul wounded by the world. In reality, Louise had been preparing for the life of a nun for over five years, and before that her desires had from time to time been turned towards the convent. In all her sorrows, whenever love had treated her too roughly, it was to that kingdom of silence that she had appealed. It only remained now for her to grow accustomed to its laws.

It has often been noticed that the persons who appear most delicate are those who overcome privations with the best grace. And this was the case with the Duchesse. What would have demanded from another woman much effort and a painful apprenticeship was to her the work of a day. The bareness of her cell, straw for her bed, the absence of furniture and sheets, mattered very little to a woman who in a richly decorated room had found herself bewildered and abandoned. The earthenware bowl, badly cooked vegetables, and the pittance of ember-week, mattered nothing when the most savoury food had been mixed with the poison of tears. In satin and pearls,

LOUISE DE LA VALLIÈRE

From an old print, photographed by kind permission of Messrs. Maggs Bros.

she had been forced to ornament her rival's beauty. What did she then care for rough clothes? Thus it was that Louise easily traversed paths famous for their difficulties. Physical feelings in her had become so hardened by suffering, and she had grown so indifferent to all material things, that she no longer seemed to feel them. Her body had become spiritualized. Her nerves were so strung up that they were like a lyre on which the hymn of her repentance incessantly harmonized and vibrated. There was no reason for the nuptial bliss which she desired to be delayed any longer.

The Sunday which in the Church calendar is called "The Sunday of the Good Shepherd," because on it are read the touching words about our Lord carrying the poor lost lamb on His shoulders, seemed designed above all others for the ceremony of Louise's taking the veil. According to custom a sermon had to be preached. Louise would have liked Bossuet to be the orator. She owed it to him and to his intervention that she was to become a Carmelite. Who would have been better able to render her thanks to God? But altogether absorbed in saving other souls, Bossuet had followed the Court to the war. Without allowing himself to be intimidated by the freedom and arrogance of Mme. de Montespan's manner since her recent and decisive victory, he preached and exhorted her to give up the King.

Even to the King himself his reproaches were very severe : " You are admired," he said to him from his improvised pulpit in the centre of the camp, " nothing else is spoken of but the grandeur of your troops, and of what they will be capable of doing under so great a leader ; but what will it benefit you, Sire, to be feared and victorious, if within yourself you are conquered and held captive ? Pray God that he may free your heart."

At one moment the great reformer had reason to believe that his words had taken effect. On the occasion of the Jubilee the King went to confession and gave his word never to see his mistress again. For a month, indeed, he was separated from her, and she pretended to be resigned. Bossuet had such confidence in their good faith that he considered there was no danger in the lovers meeting, on condition that the interviews took place in the presence of witnesses. It is well known that as soon as they saw each other, Louis and Athénaïs were very quickly drawn back to each other. Little by little they reached a recess in the window, spoke in whispers, wept, bowed to the matron ordered to watch them, and went into a neighbouring room. From that time, according to Saint-Simon, dates the origin of the Duchesse d'Orleans and later the Comte de Toulouse.

The wits rallied Bossuet on allowing himself

to be duped. He could not forgive himself for having been so trusting and he determined to reconquer the lost ground. Kept near the guilty pair by his vain hopes, he nominated the Bishop of Aire to take his place at the ceremony at the Carmel. Louise accepted the disappointment and offered it to God, with the rest, for the conversion of the sinner whose soul she now loved as much as she had before loved his earthly form. "How happy I should be," she exclaimed, "if by the sufferings of my spirit and my body I could buy his salvation!"

Although the ceremony of taking the veil was not to take place until eleven o'clock, a crowd gathered early in the morning on the 2nd of June, 1674, anxious to witness the symbolic marriage of the King's former mistress with God. The Rue Saint-Jacques and the neighbourhood was choked with coaches filled with lords and ladies of the Court in full dress. Added to the relatives and friends of La Vallière were many personalities of the Court: the Duchesse de Bouillon, the Duchesse de Guise, the Duchesse de Mecklenburg, the young Mademoiselle, who had seen Louise weeping at the bedside of her mother in her death agonies, Mme. de Longueville, returned from her wanderings, Mlle. de Scudèry, Mme. de Caylus, all who had not accompanied the King to Franche-Comté.

The ceremony of taking the veil gives back to

the world, for a few hours, the woman who is eager to leave it. Dressed in a wedding gown, the postulant recrosses the threshold of the cloister, and for the last time mixes with those who have loved her. Everyone gathered round Louise anxiously, looked into her face, and examined her as one who is half dead, and already enclosed in a dreary retreat. At a given moment the professed nuns, looking, with their black veils and hoods of white linen, like statues in mourning, went by in double file towards the door of the convent with lighted candles in their hands and intoning the Veni Creator. The Prioress preceded them carrying a high cross, like those that are placed over graves. Three knocks were heard from within—in this way the postulant begs to be allowed to enter. The door was opened and she appeared. Elegance and taste—the last vanities to be sacrificed—showed themselves in every detail of Louise's dress. A shudder was felt in the church. Never before, it seemed, had so much grace, so much youth and living beauty, so great a fortune, sought so sombre a burial. Louise was brought in and the procession led her to the choir where, before the iron gates of the cloister, a splendid prie-dieu awaited her.

The altar that morning was ablaze with colour. Among its lighted candles, a profusion of flowers —the only luxury permitted in convents—pressed their fair heads together ; peonies with their deep

hearts of fire, roses with their divine scent, pale wax-like lilies standing high, as if drawn towards the heavens. The door of the vestry opened, and priests in their vestments preceded Mgr. de Formentières, a mitre on his head and a cross in his hand. In a silence chock-full of emotion, the interrogatory began :

" What do you desire ? " said the Bishop, turning towards the postulant.

A voice that seemed to come from far away answered : " The mercy of God, the poverty of the Order, and the companionship of the sisters."

" Do you come here of your own free will, with the intention of receiving the holy robe ? "

" Yes, by the grace of God."

Then the priest's hand was put through the narrow opening between the bars of wood, and as a first sign of the self-denial which soon would be complete, he took off the Duchesse's coronet. Then with closed eyes and parted lips she listened to the marriage service. The joy of the divine nuptials moved her to ecstasy. She felt herself becoming the chosen of Christ, the bride that He had deigned to accept.

A movement at the other end of the iron gates announced the moment for the sermon. There was a rustle of silk skirts and a few whispers were exchanged. For the last time in her life Louise sat in an arm-chair, and the Bishop commenced in the following words : " My sister. It is a

great reason for hope and consolation for sinners to remark in God the same feelings towards them that they should have for Him, if they are faithful."

Mgr. Formentières, with his able mind and apostolic soul, was in a position to realize the delicate nature of his subject and to express himself discreetly. He was not afraid to allude to the past, which, however scandalous it may have been, appeared that day only in the light of a magnificent example of gracious mercy. He quoted the Gospel of the Good Shepherd, and applied it to Louise. He spoke of Jesus looking for His lambs in the places where they had strayed. If He did not search for them, who would bring them home again? The penitent never had the strength to take a single step from the seductions that had been her ruin. The preacher was bold enough to present a picture of the Court, its dangers and its vices, with the Court itself listening to him. "The atmosphere there," he said, "is so contagious that one has to search for the secret that can prevent one from perishing." In the second part of the sermon he insisted on the goodness of the Shepherd. He never addressed a word of reproach to His lambs, and never punished them. On the contrary, He helped them to regain the fold. He carried them in His arms. What joy when at last the door is opened to receive them. Friends and relations are invited,

for there can be no greater festival than the conversion of a sinner.

To these commonplaces, Bossuet's substitute added more useful and stronger teachings. He did not wish the novice to be deceived. If the threshold of the cloister was sown with roses, if the cell, at the beginning, seemed soft and scented, more rigid days would follow. "Do not think," he said, "that the delights of to-day can never be altered. Sorrow, I warn you, will succeed the joys. Did it not happen that Saint-Teresa herself, after being attracted as you are by the charm of pardon, spent twenty years in bitterness?"

Louise was not frightened by these severe predictions. She received the vestments of the order from the hands of the Bishop, as he blessed them one by one. The dress, which was the colour of dead leaves, was the winding-sheet of the luxuries of the body. The scapulary, the symbol of the life that is crucified; the stomacher, the girdle, the rosary, the veil, emblems of solitude, of a life hidden in God. Once again, preceded by the black phantoms who had brought her, the young woman disappeared, and when she returned a few moments later she wore no longer either the rich dress or the beautiful rolls of hair. There only remained a nun, whose white veil floated from her shoulders like the wings of a dove.

Then followed the pathetic ceremony, so often described and which always leaves a painful memory in the minds of all who witness it. Nothing, in fact, so closely resembles the horror that awaits us all. The body of the new nun is stretched out on a flagstone ; a winding-sheet covers it ; the entire community files out singing the hymn of the dead.

When La Vallière was raised from this position, she was called Sister Louise de La Miséricorde. Her companions led her to the cell prepared for her. "An immense desert enclosed in a few square feet," as this room has been described, containing nothing, neither table, nor chairs, nor books ; nothing but a crucifix and a skull above the little bed. The Carmelites have one pretty custom. The cell is filled with flowers twice during the life of each sister : on the day when she enters it for the first time, and on the last day, when she is reunited for all eternity to her heavenly bridegroom.

A year later, almost on the same day, a second ceremony confirmed the vows taken at the first. On the 3rd of June, 1675, in the midst of a splendour the brilliance of which was in every detail equal to that of the taking of the veil, and before an even greater crowd of people, Sister Louise took the irrevocable vows of obedience and poverty and chastity. The Queen herself was present. The sorrows, the insults, and the indiffer-

ence heaped on her by the King and Mme. de Montespan, had for the last year heightened the prestige of the penitent in the eyes of her royal mistress. She remembered the delicacy with which Louise had at least tried to hide her guilt. A sort of kindred feeling brought them closer together, and Maria-Teresa was very glad, publicly, to show her forgiveness and sympathy. Taking advantage of the right accorded to queens to enter any cloister, the Queen went into the choir reserved for the nuns and with great solicitude helped La Vallière and blessed and kissed her.

That day Bossuet spoke, and his funeral oration was entirely worthy of himself and of her who was the object of it. If it were not the marvel of eloquence that had been expected, and if it did not contain the direct allusions that the malice of the spectators had hoped for, never had more charitable and encouraging words fallen from his lips. The text was taken from the twenty-first book of the Apocalypse: "He who was on the throne said: I can revive all things." And the orator applied these words to the wonderful revival of the soul whose compact with heaven he had come there to seal. From what he knew of La Vallière, both at the time when she fled from his teaching, as well as during the period when she had rewarded his apostolic zeal, Bossuet realized God's power of forgiveness.

In a few simple words, entirely free from all idea of profanity, he went on to describe the two successive passions which had occupied the heart of Louise—the love of self which led her to despise God and the love of God which led her to despise herself. When, out of respect for the holy place and for the ears that listened to him, Bossuet said "herself," everyone knew what he meant and to what love he referred. "My sister," he warned her at the beginning, "from the things that I will have to say, you will be able to pick out that which is intended for yourself." And Louise recognized herself when, recalling the changes that take place sometimes in the souls of men and women, the preacher affirmed that the Holy Ghost works secretly in them, transforms them, and by stirring up the very depths of their being, brings the unknown to the surface. "Christians," he cried, carried away by the holy enthusiasm of those who see the hand of Providence in all human actions, "nothing is more wonderful than these changes. What have we seen and what do we see now? Compare the one state with the other! I need say no more, the thing speaks for itself." He showed the soul as it gradually became purified from its stains, and regenerated, as it approached nearer and nearer to the Creator. "But would she dare to sacrifice the tender, beloved, and much-cared-for body?" he asked. And in the name of her whose courage

he knew so well, he answered with assurance. "Yes; she turned against her body as from her most dangerous enemy; she declared war against it, irreconcilable and to the death. When once the body has been deceived by pleasure, the soul must keep it in check by force, and for fear of allowing herself the slightest freedom from which she might again stray, she had chosen the cloister. There, shut in on all sides, how could she breathe if she could not turn towards heaven."

Louise felt a different creature. The miracle had been accomplished. She had been at last freed from impure regrets and torments, and from the desires that had obsessed her for so long. In this rarefied atmosphere she was lifted out of herself. Her heart no longer contained anything but peace and confidence. The song of the angels surrounded her. Christ, the irresistible conqueror, had triumphed over the King.

The irrevocable now only had to be completed. Louise received the black veil of the Order from the hands of the Queen. The Bishop of Paris blessed it and the Prioress arranged its folds on her head. Once again the Carmelite was stretched out on the winding-sheet, and the sisters sprinkled Holy Water over her. Carried away into the divine life, she was now bound to it by the strength of vows which nothing could ever break, and even more by the grace of God that had made her pronounce them.

Mme. de Sevigné, always curious to see everything that stirred Paris, was present on this occasion, and for once she laid aside the light, bantering tone she had always used in referring to Louise de La Vallière. She was really touched at last. "The beautiful and courageous creature," she wrote to Mme. de Grignan, "yesterday took the vows in the chapel of Notre Dame des Champs; and she did it as she has done everything else in her life, in a noble and charming manner." A few years later, drawn by her reputation for sanctity, which increased day by day, the witty Marquise went to visit the ex-Duchesse. In the face of a simplicity which was so truly humble and of the grave sweetness with which the latter received her, she could not help expressing her admiration. "An angel appeared to me! I beheld before my eyes all the charm that we used to see in the past. I found her neither bloated nor sallow. She was stouter and looked more content; but she still has the same eyes and the same way of looking. The austerities, the bad food, and the want of sleep have not made them hollow or sunken. The strange cloak took away nothing from her grace or her bearing. As regards her modesty, that is no greater than when she brought a Princesse de Conti into the world; and yet it is not too much for a Carmelite. She was very charming to me and spoke so nicely of you, my daughter, and said just the right thing

all the time. Everything indeed that she said was entirely in keeping with her personality, and I think there is nothing better to say than that." The song of praise finishes with this reflection, in which one distinguishes the perfect balance, the unerring and solid judgment of the incomparable writer of chronicles : " In reality the cloak and the retreat have given a great dignity to Mlle. de La Vallière."

In spite of her desire to remain hidden from all, and entirely separated from those to whom she had said good-bye, obedience obliged Sister Louise to receive visitors. Not being able to escape, she took her precautions. " When I am sent for to the parlour," she wrote to him whom it pleased her to look upon always as her spiritual father and guide, " I go first before the Lord and pray Him to keep me from harm, and I come back again afterwards to thank Him for having brought me away from those who sin against Him, and put me amongst those whose only thought is to serve Him." Although the King had told the Princesses who went to visit her not to forget that she was a Duchesse, and to make her be seated, she shrank from the honour. More humble than a servant, she only thought of her own unworthiness, and of the honour that had been accorded her in being admitted amongst her pure companions. " The day when I took the vow," she said, " I renounced all, forgot all. I

am only a nun like the rest, but more humble than they."

Among the people of rank who disturbed her retreat were the Queen, the Princesse Palatine, Monsieur, Mademoiselle, the Nuncio, various foreign ambassadors, and La Montespan. After the first year, the Marquise came several times. Her visits are to be explained by the changes in fortune which made her at times a goddess and at others opened before her the same abyss of disgrace in which she had seen her rival sink. Although Louise's departure had given Athénaïs an incomparable triumph, and though intoxicated with love, and liberty, and power, the King had raised her higher than any sovereign had ever before dared to raise his mistress, the days that followed showed that the rock is never far from the Capitol.

A woman, poor, obscure, and who had to all appearances nothing to make her an object of jealousy, had been for some years weaving a net in the dark, which finally caught the Marquise in its toils. Placed in charge of the royal bastards on account of her wonderful powers of teaching, the Widow Scarron, at the same time as she made wonders of her pupils, wormed herself into the good graces of their father. Not very sympathetic at first sight, with her grave ways and her severe manner of dressing, this woman, of whom it could be said with truth that she was "splendidly

commonplace," lost no time in using the discreet and telling charm of her conversation. Tired at times by the uproarious laughter as well as the stormy temper of his mistress, the King liked to rest in the company of a woman, still young, and who without trying to attract attention knew how to please him and to keep him by her side. The rise of Mme. Scarron became evident the day when, more as a reward for the agreeable hours he had passed in her company than for her good offices as a governess, Louis gave her as a present the estate of Maintenon, to which was attached a marquisate.

It was probably about this time, when Athénaïs had a glimpse of coming disgrace, that she paid her first visit to La Vallière. The desire to see her old rival, to question her and learn from her own lips how it feels to be deserted, did not, however, come to the haughty beauty until the moment when she began to feel that she was threatened. The questions put by the Marquise to the nun point to a soul in whom fear had entered, and who already had begun to face the possibility of herself being banished.

" All the same, are you as happy here as they say ? "

Louise even in the scapulary still possessed the tact and distinction of which in her life as a great lady she had constantly given evidence.

" No," she replied, " I am not happy. I am

content." Thus pointing out the exact distance that exists between happiness as understood by the world, and that higher satisfaction which is the treasure of the religious.

But the woman to whom this difference was shown was not capable of understanding it. With all her wit, Mme. de Montespan in her misfortune was never able to follow the rival at whom she had so often jeered. Her fall found her heart still full of vanity and desire. She would fly into rages and resort to insults and foul words. She could never take up the noble attitude which at least inspires respect. She would go backwards and forwards in an undignified manner from the Court to the Convent, evicted from the one and not able to get used to the other. In a moment of mental aberration she was to go so far as to implore and beg of M. de Montespan to take her back. "If he will deign to consent," she wrote, "I will restore the roof that I deserted." This degradation was spared to the mother of the royal children. The husband who had celebrated the funeral service of his wife refused to exhume her.

Petit-Bourg still remained to Mme. de Montespan. She tried to regain her royal power. The fêtes that she gave were frequented by the best people. They danced and acted comedies; but the mind of the châtelaine was haunted by phantoms. This woman, who had lost more than

MADAME DE MAINTENON

By P. Giffart

life, trembled at the idea of death. Young girls were ordered to distract her during the day and make her forget her age. At night, servants held lighted torches round her bed to drive away the disquieting darkness.

It was in this fallen state, despised alike by the sons who bore her name as by her illegitimate children, that towards 1685 La Montespan went again to Louise. She wanted advice. She thought she might find the secret of supreme resignation in her who had been her victim.

Louise forgot the cruelties which one day at Versailles had forced from her the complaint: "When I suffer at the Carmel, I shall think of what these people have made me suffer, and everything else will appear light in comparison." She was all pity and gentleness. She spoke to Athénaïs as if they had always been friends. She even went so far as to confide in her: "I have arrived at a state of such absolute tranquillity as to anything that may happen to me in this world that health, illness, rest, sorrows, or joys seem to me to have the same face. I shut my eyes and allow myself to be guided by obedience." But La Montespan did not understand. Resignation is a noble quality which belongs only to the souls of the chosen. To reach the pure regions of perfect renunciation, one must have left far behind the base plains of self-interest, and one must have become used to great flights towards the ideal.

Long before she had reached the state of perfect peace from which nothing could now take her, Louise had detached her heart from the vanities of the world. A love without alloy had made her feel the nothingness of all that was not love. This treasure of her soul had alone seemed to her worthy of consideration, and when it was lost, without a single regret, without once looking back, she left the vessel in which her fortune was sunk. What were titles, rank, and wealth when love was missing?

And what of her children? Mlle. de Blois was ten years old and the Comte de Vermandois eight when La Vallière left the Court. They were both charming, with sweet dispositions and delightful, frank faces. The chronicles tell us nothing about the separation between the mother and the little beings to whom, admitting that she may have been indifferent enough in the days of her happiness, she must have grown attached since she had been unhappy. We only know that one of the first sacrifices that she forced upon herself was to drive away from her those living images of her sin. "Never to see them again," she exclaimed in a sort of fanaticism of expiation. Does not this cry of hers rather reveal the troubled state of a conscience that feared her weakness than the want of maternal love with which she has often been credited?

God does not accept all the offerings that are

made to Him. Thinking, quite rightly, that her children could only gain by associating with a saint, Louis insisted that they should visit her very often, and that she should give them religious advice.

On this point, as in others, Sister Louise de La Miséricorde showed herself a slave to the rules of the Order. The Princesse Palatine, having one day brought the Comte de Vermandois to the parlour, wished to allow the affectionate child to kiss his mother. His tender age permitted him to pass the iron gateway; but the Carmelite obstinately refused to make any exception in his favour. How great must have been her remorse the day when destiny decided that she should never again press her beloved son to her heart! After a few years of folly and dissipation, the young man obtained permission from the King to go to the war. He was brave, handsome, generous, and disinterested. A first engagement, in which he was successful, won him much praise. The King's smile augured for him glory and fortune . . . but this faded away under the walls of Courtrai, where a malignant fever carried him off.

When Louise heard the news, she was prostrate. Her soul was broken and torn, and at last, having conquered her pain, she pronounced the memorable words: "I must not weep too much for the death of a son whose birth I have not wept for enough." And out of respect for the chaste

companions that the cloister had given her, she triumphed over her tears, and ordered silence about her mourning, because of the scandal that it might rake up.

Her daughter remained to her, the charming and delightful Marie-Anne, whose slender grace was thus described by La Fontaine :—

> L'herbe l'aurait portée ;
> Une fleur n'aurait pas
> Reçu l'empreinte de ses pas.

Married in 1680 to Louis-Armand de Bourbon, Prince de Conti, Marie-Anne came often to visit her mother ; but though she was tender and submissive, she does not seem to have profited much by her advice. Three months had scarcely passed after her marriage with a prince of the blood, when the *ménage* split up. Louis-Armand, who until the age of nineteen had been held with a very tight rein by his austere and religious father, all at once became emancipated. From the quiet boy that he had appeared to be, he grew into a prodigious libertine, and, with a carelessness in keeping with the manners of the age, he entirely forgot his conjugal duties. His child-wife was not of a nature to allow herself to be neglected. She became "as wicked as a little harpy." "What!" she exclaimed ; "is it possible that I have allowed myself to be married to an idiot, a conceited fool, and above all, a badly built one ? " The Royal Family was stupefied at these misunderstandings.

The King scolded, and everybody wondered where a little girl of fourteen had learnt what well-built men should be like. The children had to be separated.

Happily, Louis-Armand had the generous blood of the Condés in his veins. He accepted a commission to fight against the Turks, and his bravery, the wounds he received, and the rumours of his success that reached Versailles, made more impression on the light-hearted Marie-Anne than his presence had ever done. She took it into her head all of a sudden to love her husband, and wrote him letters, finding even in this a means of displeasing her royal father. Not thinking that her letters would be opened, the Princesse made fun of everyone and particularly of her sister, Mlle. de Nantes, the daughter of the King and Mme. de Montespan, whom La Vallière had consented to hold at the baptismal font. This meant exposing herself to the reprisals of the Marquise, and she did not fail to stir the father against one of the Princesses in favour of the other.

This escapade was very trivial and would not have had any consequences, if it had not been that a much graver imprudence was committed by the young woman in directing her wit against Mme. de Maintenon. Although she had not ostensibly taken Athénaïs' place, nor yet the one that the death of the Queen was soon to leave vacant, the new favourite already reigned in

secret. The King visited her every day, talked at great length with her, complained of his mistress, was consoled by her, and left charmed with the wily "dévote's" insinuations. To attack her meant trouble, for she, at that time, had the strongest hold on the heart of Louis XIV. He sent for the Princesse de Conti, and for three hours, says Bussy-Rabutin, "washed her head for her violently."

Mme. de Maintenon was much too clever to permit a dispute on her account to continue between the King and the daughter whom he loved best. She was the first to try and bring about a reconciliation, not, however, without having reprimanded the impertinent girl, and having given her a piece of her mind: "Yes, cry, Madame, cry, for there is no greater sorrow than not to have a kind heart."

But more bitter tears were soon to overflow the rosy cheeks of Marie-Anne. At the moment when proud of the deeds of prowess he had accomplished, Armand de Bourbon fell ill with smallpox while crossing the frontier of the Rhine on his road back to Paris, where his pardon awaited him. In three days the scourge which was then ravaging Europe carried him off, leaving to her destiny that most fragile and charming of all objects, a widow of twenty.

La Vallière had not come to the end of her trials. It seemed as if God, in His jealousy to possess in

its entirety the heart which had been given to Him, had decided to dry up successively all the sources of human affection. Her brother, the companion of her childhood, the dear friend who had supported her in her hours of peril, also died prematurely. "What can I say to you about it?" she wrote to the Maréchal de Bellefonds. . . . "The Lord has asked this sacrifice of me, counting my suffering as nothing, and it is, in fact, nothing. I feel ready, since it is His Holy will, to offer up to Him in sacrifice all that is dearest to me in the world."

To understand sentiments that are so far removed from nature, we must enter into the particular spirit of the Carmel, and remember the famous exclamation made by the woman who founded it. "To suffer, oh, my God, or to die!" Not only is the soul of the nun blackened by its own sins, but it takes on itself the sins of others, and undertakes to expiate them. For this redemption, no trial can be too heavy. All feelings become transposed. Words have no longer their accustomed significance. What we call misfortune and suffering is changed into joy and felicity. A Carmelite rejoices when she is most crushed by the weight of her suffering. She longs for a surfeit of trials as others for relief from them. Extremity of suffering satiates her. She enlarges her wounds and wildly plunges her nails into them.

Louise, however, had her hours of exhaustion. Too tired to bear news from the outer world which brought back to her memory all that she longed to forget, the poor seeker after rest went one day to see the Prioress.

"My Mother," she begged, "send me far away from here to a lonely convent in the provinces where I can have leisure to love God and forget all the rest."

Her presence was too dear and her example too precious for the community to be deprived of it. She had to submit, and the crowd of insipid visitors, often even beggars, continued to besiege her.

In the days of her affluence, Louise's family—her mother, sister, cousins—had got into the habit of depending on her generosity, and it was difficult to make these needy people understand that the treasure that they had thought inexhaustible had dried up. There was nothing left to the nun; less than nothing, for her son had left many debts. Her creditors harassed her by letter and even went so far as to call at the convent. At the best of times she had not been a good business woman. Figures always confused her. The King alone could have got her out of her trouble. But she could not make up her mind to appeal to him. . . . How could she ask favours of him now, when she had shrunk from doing so when she was beautiful, triumphant,

and loved ? The circumstances at last forced her hand, but this only proves once again how brave this gentle soul could be in the service of those she loved.

The Marquis de La Vallière had, at his death, left a young son and very little money. The Marquise, anxious to assure the future of this child, begged her sister-in-law to intercede so that the government of Bourbonnais should be included in the paternal inheritance. It only needed the loving memory of her brother to overcome Louise's repugnance. Triumphing over herself, she addressed a request to the King. Let it be said in his favour that Louis XIV hastened to grant it. To the official act which confirmed the succession in the name of the young man, who later became the Duc de La Vallière, he added a few kind words, the only ones that reached Louise during the years of her seclusion : " If I were holy enough to approach so saintly a nun as she is, I would have gone myself to express to her my sympathy with her in her loss."

Far from being a help to her in her pain, Louise was very troubled by these words. The very idea that she might find herself in the presence of him who had been the master of her soul worried and bewildered her. " If it ever happened that the King were to come here," she declared, " I should hide myself so effectively that they could never find me." Her suffering was quite un-

necessary. Louis XIV never showed the slightest wish to see her again. As with most men, he lived entirely in the present, and had lost even the memory of the past. "La Vallière was to the King as if she had never existed," says the judicious Palatine. And when thirty years later he heard that Sister Louise de La Miséricorde was no more, he could say with truth, "For me she ceased to exist the day she entered the convent."

But she never forgot him. . . . How could the mistress forget when it was from him she had received her thrills, her happiness, her affection, and more—the infinite pain of love? It was useless to pray, and weep, and shut her eyes and her ears; the life she had lived remained, obstinate and not to be uprooted. Thoughts of the past obsessed her. They clung to her like a fever brought back from tropical parts, and they followed her into the grave. "Oh, these troublesome memories," she groaned, "which never leave me! How I wish they could be taken from me!"

With the zeal that she threw into everything she did, Louise tried to rid herself of thoughts of the life that had been. By means of fasts and mortifications, she stifled the cry which rose up from the depths of her being. With iron waistbands, with sackcloth, and with whips she scourged her tender flesh. The severity she used against herself was powerless against the keenness of her

memories, and she accepted them at last, and resigned herself to them as to a kind of purgatory. She decided at least to make use of them. In each she found some particular form of penitence, a privation that was the reverse of the pleasure she had formerly enjoyed. Thus it was that one warm day, remembering the delicious beverages with which she had quenched her thirst at Versailles, she condemned herself not to drink anything at all. For three years her lips burnt and were parched without relief. Her health began to be affected. It mattered little ! Had not the Christ at His crucifixion also endured thirst ? At the thought of the gall and vinegar which His tormentors had given Jesus to drink, the gentle creature was more moved than by her own martyrdom. She longed to press her head against the bleeding crown, to submit to the nails, to allow herself to be spat upon and to share all the insults !

But endurance has its limits. At the height of rapture the soul bends and falls back like a broken plant. These were the cruel hours foreseen by Mgr. de Formentières when, on the day she took the veil, he had told Louise that convent life would not always be as easy as it seemed to her first zeal. " You must expect trials," he had said. " You would have cause to complain if, being the bride of Christ, He did not allow you to share the pains He had endured." These trials

of which the Bishop had spoken, were the aridity and the sadness in which it seemed as if the grace of God had been taken away. All those who have arrived at the facts of mysticism know these times. They tremble when they feel them approaching. Sister Louise was not spared any more than Saint Gertrude, Saint-Teresa, or the blessed John of the Cross. She traversed the deserted regions of which the Song of Songs says: "I opened to my beloved; but my beloved had withdrawn himself and was gone. My soul had failed me when he spoke; I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave no answer." For a long time she vacillated between extremes of happiness and pain, the summer and winter of the heart.

Her insistence had obtained permission for her to spend two hours more each day in prayer than the regulated time, and although these hours were taken away from those she spent in sleep, she never gave them up. She was up on cold winter mornings before the dawn and went to the chapel, where, on her knees, with an empty stomach, and her hands exposed to the cold, she spoke with her bridegroom. Often when the sisters came down to matins, they found her fainted, her cheeks pale and her limbs frozen.

In the long run, time did for her what the convent walls alone had refused to the seeker after solitude. Her retreat became more profound.

Many of those whom a sincere affection used to bring often to the Rue Saint-Jacques died. Others dispersed. The younger generation, attracted at first by curiosity, grew tired of finding in the recluse no signs that suggested the old favourite. Even her correspondence fell off.

One of the last events that broke the silence of Louise was the death of Mother Agnes of Jesus, the excellent woman who had opened the gates of the cloister to her. She expressed her sorrow on this subject to the Maréchal Bellefonds in terms which showed the humility of her heart: "You know all that I owe her. It needed all her charity to receive me here. After seventeen years, I am still astonished at the kindness I have received at her hands, and I hope that Our Lord will pay her back a hundredfold."

After a time the Princesse de Conti alone came to ask for her mother at the convent parlour. She generally came to see her in her hours of sadness. Louise took advantage of these visits to guide the young woman, and to make her see what a precipice a life of pleasure was. More than once she was obliged to advise marriage as a safeguard. But Marie-Anne refused successively the most advantageous matches—her brother-in-law the Duc, who was amiable and loved her; Monsieur's son, who was destined to become the Regent; and many others. She preferred her liberty to everything else, and the use she made of that

liberty makes us regret that no one was persuasive enough to force her to give it up ; for left to herself, this charming young woman only succeeded in ruining her life. The King's preference for her was useless to her. Her sisters were jealous of it, but she never knew how to turn the King's favours to her advantage. Her eccentric behaviour added to the ruin of her reputation even more perhaps than her conduct. "That poor woman," was Sister Louise de La Miséricorde's expression for her daughter, and it is easy to understand her pity. The Princesse de Conti, "that wonder of wonders," "that masterpiece of nature," appeared to her who judged the world from behind the convent grill an object for sympathy and pity. She knew from experience what it costs a woman to save herself when nature has endowed her with a tender heart and a pretty face. It was inevitable that the holy mother should deplore the excess of dangerous gifts in the daughter who was dear to her. How often she must have burst into earnest prayer ! How many tears must have fallen on the white linen of her stomacher at the thought of the wild life which she was powerless to control ! And in her conscience she assumed no small part of the responsibility for it all. At least, the mother and daughter were able to meet on that frontier between heaven and earth which we call "kindness."

In signing the renunciation of all of which she

was possessed, and taking the vow of poverty, Louise de La Vallière had put herself beyond the power of doing good. This was a cruel sorrow to her generous heart, and she could not console herself whenever a request found her hands empty. The Princesse de Conti, who was kind-hearted like herself, took pleasure in helping her. Rich, through the generosity of her father, she gave as she spent, without counting. Though her marriage had placed her in a high position, she never ceased to take an interest in her mother's family. With a delicacy of feeling that cannot be too highly praised, she insisted that her uncles, aunts, and cousins, in the most humble positions, should treat her as a relation. It was she also who, careful of the name she had never borne, but which had been her mother's, made over the estates of Vaujours to the young Marquis de La Vallière with the dukedom which went with it. And there is every ground to suppose that it was she who, in agreement with the Queen, published the book *Les Réflexions sur la Miséricorde de Dieu*, prouder of this heritage than she was of all the jewels in her possession.

So many rare qualities make one forget many faults. Although she blamed her and spoke of her in terms of holy sorrow, Louise could not help having a weakness for this daughter, who in many ways resembled her. In a fragment of a letter which has survived, it almost seems as if in her

indulgence she went so far as to smile that tender mother smile for her child : " I am trying by my prayers to gain the Kingdom of Heaven for my daughter, for delightful as she is, the Kingdom of the World will never harm her."

The last years of La Vallière were spent peacefully. Little by little she had broken away from all earthly ties ; her thoughts had become purified ; the zeal which had always burnt her soul had become divine. But the image which had dominated her for so long had not disappeared. " To wish to forget someone," La Bruyère has said, " is still to think of him."

However totally she was separated from the world, the echo of public events scaled the walls of the Carmel. There was nothing now but rumours of misfortunes. It was impossible that the woman who had shared the victories and sung the Te Deums could be uninterested when bad times came. The century finished sadly. Turenne, Condé, Colbert, Le Tellier, Louvois, those splendid servants of the monarchy, were dead. The King was now nothing but a taciturn old man who saw falling all around him the men who had built up his glory. The glory itself had deserted him. A proud and brutal policy had made three exasperated nations combine against him. Their alliance cruelly avenged the individual defeats of each. The disastrous Peace of Ryswick left France without her navy, and with her army defeated

and her treasury empty. War, however, began again, with all Europe her enemy. Money had to be found. The wonder treasures of Versailles—torch-holders, candelabra, golden statues, vases that artists had engraved—all had to be thrown into the melting-pot. Out of filial feeling, the whole country imitated the abnegation of the sovereign. In a few days everyone sacrificed what valuables they possessed—table utensils, plate, jewels, were transformed into money. The convents no more than the churches desired to be behindhand. Their holy golden vessels were offered as burnt offerings to the country. In her old age, Louise de La Vallière, who had become the sacristan, was seen, with trembling hands, stripping the altar which she had loved to adorn ; the last gift, the supreme immolation of all that was dear to her. Thus to the end it was Louis XIV who took everything from her and she who gave everything. She placed at the feet of the King, to the uttermost farthing, all that a nun could dispose of—the attachment of her heart to the good of her country.

After this, the distress of Sister Louise was complete. Nothing further attached her to earth but the insatiable desire to suffer for him who had forgotten her. However greatly the old age of the King was tried, no doubt he was still sinning, if it were only out of pride. In any case, he was a great sinner. It was, therefore, necessary for

the gentle victim to expiate for him. In more than sixty years she did not think she had paid the full price she owed to divine justice.

Such feelings make it easy to bear trials and ill-health. And Louise was not spared them. Weakness, infirmities, rheumatism, attacked her worn-out limbs ; a chronic headache tortured her ; her digestion, ruined by fasts, was a constant pain. With all these troubles, however, she only allowed those to be known that she could not succeed in hiding. When urged to take care of herself, she replied that there could be no cure for her in this world. At times her weariness was so heavy that she hoped for the long rest. Death appeared to her like a peaceful night in which her poor sleep would not be disturbed by the bell. She called to it and was impatient of waiting for it. But all at once this wish seemed wicked to her ; she reproached herself with cowardice, and, submissive to the decrees of Providence, she once more bravely took up her burden.

At last the longed-for day arrived. Louise had been seen at matins the day before looking pale and tottering. On the 4th of June, 1710, she tried to attend again, to drag herself there by supporting herself with her emaciated hands against the wall. A faintness stayed her. Like the wick of a candle which is burnt out, she succumbed and fell at the very threshold of the sanctuary. A few hours later, the nuns found

her numbed with cold, lying on the ground, and incapable of movement. Her moral and physical energies were totally broken. She was taken into the infirmary, and for the first time in thirty years her body rested between sheets. She was consumed by a fever against which remedies were tried in vain. When they asked her to drink she asked for the Communion. It was God for whom she thirsted. As soon as the Host touched her lips she entered into a state of bliss. She was filled with mystic joys which lifted her above all human sensations. She felt no more pain. Her daughter was sent for hurriedly and found her unconscious. A mysterious colloquy was exchanged. Was it with God or with the King? Who can tell? Had not her sublime soul confused them in one adoration?

The news of her death spread rapidly. While she herself had been almost forgotten, the name of La Vallière had become a legend. A large crowd made its way to the Carmel. The effects of the penitent were exposed to view before the gates of the choir according to custom, and were the object of manifestations of grief. Louise de La Vallière must remain for all time the perfect example of the woman completely in love. It is easy to understand how men were charmed by her from her portraits, and while poets and historians re-tell the story of her joys and sorrows, her memory will flourish in the pity of kind

hearts. She loved for love's sake, this weak, gentle woman—without pride or coquetry, without a thought of ambition or self-interest, without a shadow of vanity. While she retained the smallest hope of holding her lover, she was ready to suffer, to be belittled, even to sacrifice her dignity. But when all hope had gone, she found a new store of energy in her devotion to God, and His love made her live again. She clung to this love, and strength came to her at every step of her way, until at last her soul rose to its full possibilities through her heart.

For Louise de La Vallière there was a spring-time of love followed by thirty years of reparation.

THE END

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